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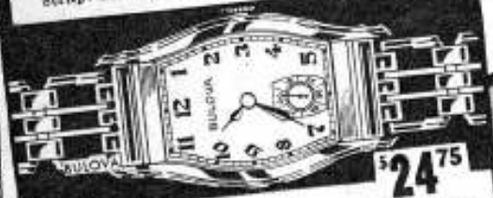

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WHIS—1

The WHISPERER

CONTENTS DECEMBER, 1940 VOL. I NO. 2

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COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

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A master jewel thief wends his way through the Park Avenue homes of the wealthy. Fabulous gems become worthless synthetics, and their mysterious substitution is left without a shred of proof. An eerie whisper is lifted over the great city and a dark, ghostly figure drifts through the night. The long arm of justice challenges the treachery of the underworld to battle, unhindered by rules, free from the arresting hand of law. The Whisperer!

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But it told enough to finger a killer!

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What others think about our book.

COVER BY HUBERT ROGERS

All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

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ABOUT THE WHISPERER

In our experience, we have been to quite a few of the larger cities of the country, usually on the trail of some particular angle of criminal investigation. A great deal of this experience has been very much "inside" stuff, because the police or investigative officers who pointed out scenes and methods of crimes knew that the information was being given not for publication, nor for any definite direct use; merely to add to the fund of background information which makes editorial work more interesting, and gives an editor a better insight into what makes stories go.

There is not a single city which does not have its "lower East Side," its "Bowery," or some similar section in which the down-and-outers find refuge. These sections furnish a very good, and very important, source of study of human beings. Anyone who takes a second glance will see much more there than the squalor or the lost hopes of men; more than the possibility of crime or criminals. You can see there, despite all the surface grime and hopelessness, real courage and determination. Many of those men do get out of there, and do get to accomplish greater things afterward. Some of them, of course, lose all hope. The battle is too tough for them.

But if imagination is allowed to roam just a little, there is plenty there for story material, and so, in this issue, we give you "Chariot of Fire," the complete novel in which Wildcat Gordon, young and unorthodox police commissioner, finds that it is easier for The Whisperer to enter into the precinct of these lost men and weed out crime than it is for a whole battalion of uniformed men. In reading this novel, you will probably adjust your views on this point in various ways. In addition, you will get yourself plenty of excitement and interesting situations.

Although this is only our second issue, we've already had comments from early readers of the first issue of The Whisperer. We've had mostly good comments, and a few criticisms, and you can bet your boots that we will do all we can to improve the things you did not like. A few of you wanted more of The Whisperer. Well, we're going to make the novel just as long as we can without giving you too much of it. Most of you approved of some of the developments and changes in the character, and additions to Wildcat's group. In the shorter stories, of course, so many characters could not be handled.

J. Van Noy, of 1268 Harrison St., Denver, Colorado, liked the story a lot, but did not approve of some of the changes in Wildcat's character; Bill Stream, of 1-124 Spokane St., Seattle, Washington, liked the cover a lot, but felt that Wildcat's chin wasn't pointed enough; Frank Brighan, Roosevelt Hotel, New Orleans, Louisiana, liked everything real well except the silenced guns which The Whisperer has. Mr. Brighan is an expert on arms, and his complaint is justified.

Silencers do not work on revolvers or automatics; in fact, are effective

only on rifles of certain power, or single-shot pistols. (Readers of another of our magazines, *Clues-Detective Stories*, have had quite a debate on this question just recently, and we had to settle it by absolutely authentic information.) However, The Whisperer's guns are of special design, far in advance of current guns, and do operate silently. This is one point in which the fiction writer has the advantage; he can take theories and make them work before they are actually workable.

It does not always follow, however, that these things cannot be done. In our *Doc Savage Magazine* we have Doc Savage use all kinds of modern scientific instruments and apparatus, and we can check up each year and prove that the "far-fetched" device, such as a flashlight without batteries; a portable receiving and transmitting set; infrared lanterns; aërial torpedoes, and others that we used have become practical. For example, we used an airplane made of plastic glass in one of our stories; six months later, such an airplane was announced as practical!

At any rate, we want all you readers to know that we appreciate your letters, good or bad. The readers are the ones we have to please, and you can be sure that we listen to what you have to say.

Whatever comments you may have on this issue, novel or short stories, will be appreciated just as much.

There'll be another great novel in the next issue of The Whisperer, with Wildcat Gordon getting better and better, giving you more action and more thrills as he goes along. This time he is faced with a strange murder—a murder that could not happen but did! A murder that was foretold, but seemed impossible of solution until some strange events took place. You'll enjoy "Killer From Nowhere" from the start until the very moment you find him! Don't miss our next issue.

One of our readers asked us whether the words that "Slug" uses in his work with The Whisperer are regular words. Yes, sir, every one of them is. Some of them are a bit complicated, and we have a secret suspicion that even Clifford Goodrich has to look them up in the dictionary himself. But they all check, and you'll find some of them pretty good words to spring on the "wise guy" at the corner some nice evening. Likewise, if you have some peculiarly "big" word that is your favorite, why not let us have it, and we'll pass it on to Clifford Goodrich for possible use. He must split his head, sometime, trying to get those big ones!

We think we've selected a nice assortment of short stories for you in this issue. There's variety and interest in them, and they're all done by writers who know how to give you what you're looking for in a short story. We're especially interested in your reaction to "Premonition," on page 76, because it is a story somewhat off of the usual track. Let us know.

Also in this issue, you will find a story with a rather clever piece of detective work. We think you will consider "The Witness Couldn't Talk," on Page 104, not only interesting from a fictional standpoint but highly enlightening in modern police methods of crime investigation. We might add that it wasn't too long ago, right here in New York City, that a much-wanted criminal was apprehended by the

Continued on page 114

HE THOUGHT HE WAS LICKED – THEN A TIP GOT BILL A GOOD JOB!

I Trained These Men

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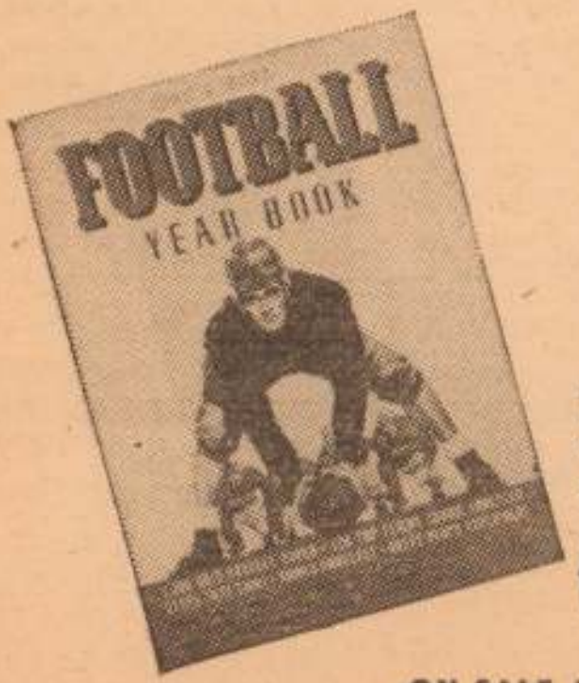

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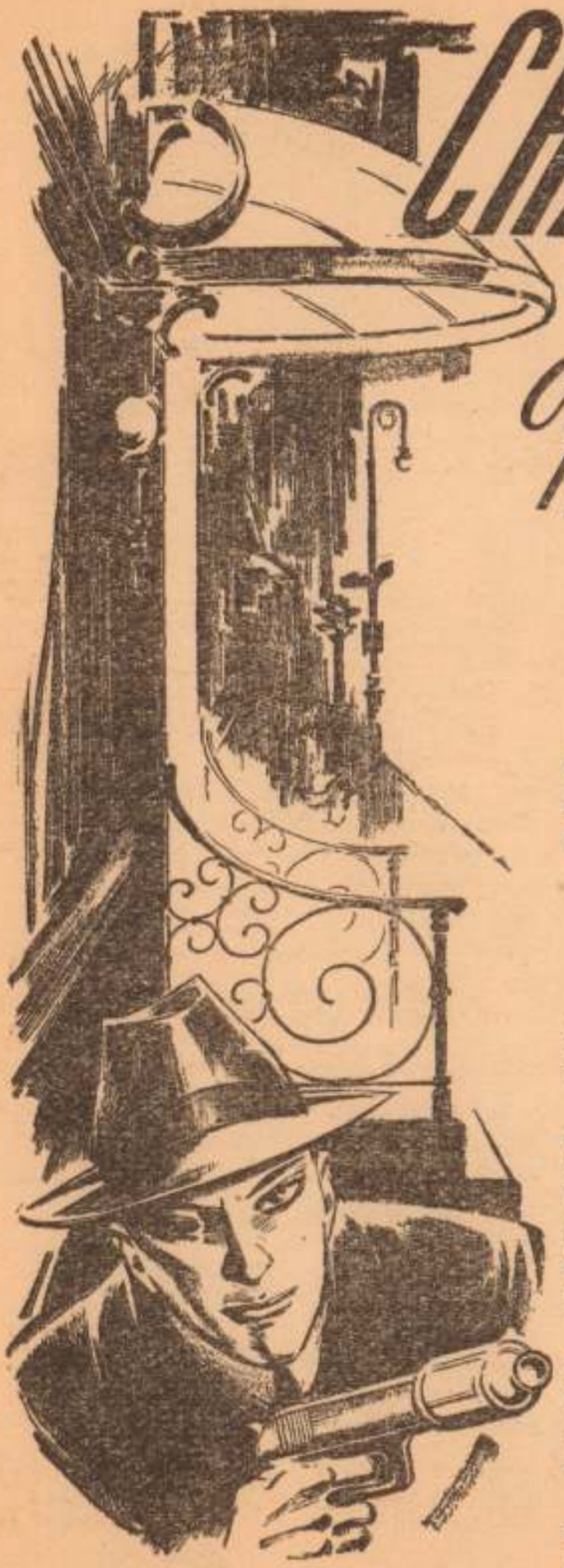

CHARIOT of FIRE

A Complete Book-length Novel

By Clifford Goodrich

Mystery rode the great city—with Death at the reins. Could The Whisperer halt its path of violence?

CHAPTER I.

CRIME STRIKES!

Morrie Manx laughed and let the jewels run between his fingers like sand trickling through an hourglass.

He stood on a chair behind the counter of his wholesale gem clearing house on the lower East Side of New York. His laugh was shrill and birdlike as he watched the brilliant sparkle of diamonds, emeralds and rubies.

"No background at all," Morrie chuckled to himself. "No way to trace a single one of them. I'll get rich on these things." He laughed shrilly again.

Morrie Manx was a midget. He was also one of the smartest fences for stolen jewelry that ever worked New York City.

The police knew that. But so far they hadn't been able to dig up a shred of proof against him.

The traceless jewels had given the cops a new kind of headache. Fortunes in gems had been showing up in Morrie Manx's clearing house. It was true that some of them showed signs of having been recut, perhaps to obliterate identifying characteristics.

But there were no jewel robberies reported that could account for the appearance of such huge quantities of gems. There were no smuggling rings operating on such a large scale. That much, undercover agents had been able to ascertain with considerable assurance. It seemed that Morrie Manx had a perfect racket. No one knew what it was.

The midget laughed once more in his shrill voice. Then he heard the click of his front door. Still grinning, Morrie turned to greet his visitor. The grin changed to an expression of disbelief and horror.

Hastily, Morrie slammed shut the drawer that held the flashing gems. He shuddered, instinctively put his hands up before his face, as if to ward off disaster.

The man who came in the door was clad entirely in black. When the door first opened into the night, there seemed for a moment to be only a white, disembodied face suspended in the darkness. It was a face that sent icy fingers of terror racing up and down Morrie Manx's spine.

The chin was long, oddly pointed. But it was the eyes that burned fear into the midget's brain. Slanted, almost Oriental, they glowed like twin bits of luminescent jade. The piercing greenness had a baleful, searching quality that had often spelled terror for the underworld.

The Whisperer, feared mystery man who preyed on crime, moved silently across the big room toward the chair on which Morrie Manx was standing. The laws that sometimes worked against the ends of justice in protecting criminals did not hamper the operations of The Whisperer.

The wraithlike foe of evil was now on the trail of a criminal plot bossed by a master crook so clever that he kept not only himself hidden from the world but the methods of his looting as well. That much The Whisperer's grapevine of the underworld had told him. That much—but no more.

"The jewels, Morrie," the black-clad battler whispered. "I will look at them. *Now!*"

The voice was an eerie challenge. The midget shuddered and pulled out the drawer of flashing gems. Swiftly, The Whisperer ran his hands through the collection. There were diamonds and emeralds, rubies and sapphires of remarkable cut and quality. It seemed impossible that such stones in such quantities could have been purloined or smuggled into the country without any hint to the authorities.

A chuckling whisper of determination drifted from The Whisperer as he stood before Morrie Manx. Jade-green eyes stared for a moment out into the darkness of the dingy street. Then the chuckling whisper stopped. He leaned forward, straining his eyes to be sure of identification in the dim reflection of a street light on the other side of the thoroughfare.

Swiftly, The Whisperer abandoned his scrutiny of the jewels. He padded silently to the door and out into the night. Morrie Manx breathed a sigh of relief. He ran

to the window to see what had attracted the attention of The Whisperer.

Morrie saw only a girl moving swiftly down the street. She was a pretty girl, tall, with ash-blond hair. Her movements were furtive, as if she had some important secret to conceal. She looked quickly behind her, then flagged a cruising taxicab.

The Whisperer was flattened in the entrance of a cheap clothing store. The girl did not see him. To her eyes, the street was entirely empty.

"Park Avenue and Sixtieth Street," she told the driver. "Make it fast."

The cab rumbled off on the cobblestones. The Whisperer darted to a black coupé parked nearby. Immediately he was on the trail of that taxi.

The Whisperer had encountered this strange girl before, in his efforts to unmask the new siege of crime he was certain was just gaining momentum. Who she was, he did not know. But an instinctive linking of many minute details led The Whisperer to believe that she was somehow connected with the mystery of the traceless jewels.

Perhaps it was little more than a hunch. But The Whisperer did not ignore his hunches. Often they had led to the destruction of criminals.

There was nothing in the placid atmosphere of Park Avenue that night to indicate that murder was brewing. A fat cop named Dennis Monahan patrolled his beat as usual. He stabbed the pale beam of a flashlight into an alley that separated the multiple mansions of the wealthy from the more tawdry dwellings of their neighbors. Officer Monahan knew that when crime attacks the homes of the rich, it often bridges that narrow gap to accomplish its evil tasks.

His inspection was suddenly interrupted by the sound of brawling from the street outside. The cop moved swiftly, for a man of his huge bulk, and padded back to Park Avenue. There, he saw two white-tied, top-hatted youths, struggling beside a parked taxicab. One swung lustily at the other, missed and almost fell to the pavement.

"Ish Harlem," he insisted thickly. "Thash where we'll go."

The other pawed ineffectually.

"No, shir," he mumbled. "I wanna go Silver Slipper."

Monahan grunted in annoyance. Smoothing out the difficulties of wealthy drunks was one of the headaches that went with his beat. He shoved his big body between the two.

"Sure now," he rumbled, "it's neither place ye'll be goin' if this sort of thing continues. It'll rather be the jail for both of ye."

The two young men wavered. Then both of them flung their arms around Monahan. The cop could not see the hard look of understanding that passed between them. He had no way of knowing that this little scene had been carefully rehearsed.

But two jade-green eyes did see that quick, hard glance. The Whisperer had slid unobserved from his black coupé. A soft hiss of understanding escaped the crime fighter's lips. Then he merged into the background of darkness.

The two "drunks" seemed to quickly patch up their differences.

"Good ol' offisher," one of them mumbled. "He don't wannus to fight. O. K. Lesh go. Anywhersh."

They climbed into their cab and

the machine roared away.

The girl had disembarked from her taxicab during the argument between the two young men. She seemed to hesitate on the corner. Then she struck a bold attitude, began to powder her nose with an air of insolence. Monahan turned from his peacemaking job and saw her. Again he grunted in annoyance. She was an attractive girl, but there was a hard set to her mouth and a purposeful glint in her deep-blue eyes that somehow marred her beauty. Her cheap clothes, cheap shoes and the even cheaper perfume that reeked in the air told Monahan that she did not belong on Park Avenue. Her half-provocative manner decided him to send her on her way.

"Better move on, sister," Monahan said abruptly. "I'll be after keeping an eye on you here."

The girl's answer made the cop blink his eyes. The cultured tones fitted neither her attitude nor her attire.

"Very well, officer," she replied. "I am sorry if I have disturbed you."

Monahan shoved his hat back and scratched his head as the girl moved through the gloom toward Lexington Avenue. Then he shrugged and turned back to Park. As long as she left his beat, it wasn't any of his concern.

But there was no prescribed beat for the long arm of justice. The Whisperer had heard the cultured answer of the hard-looking blonde. He moved from a patch of blackness to follow her.

The girl walked with furtive stealth. She glanced once into the alley that Monahan had been inspecting when the two "drunks" had distracted him. Light that gleamed from one window in the man-made cliff that housed the families of the wealthy seemed to hold the girl's attention. She shuddered, glanced at a slip of paper that was in her hand, then hurried on. In her haste, the slip of paper dropped from her fingers.

The Whisperer picked it up, cupped a tiny pencil flashlight in one hand and read the writing on it. A soft, eerie whisper of surprise came from the lips of the ghostlike foe of crime. Instantly, he knew that he had been right in connecting the girl with the mystery of the traceless jewels.

Beside the address on the slip of paper was the name of Isaac Dejeune. The Whisperer knew that Isaac Dejeune was an old retired importer whose collection of diamonds, emeralds and rubies was one of the most fabulous private displays in existence. It was a collection that would be worth a fortune to any crook, even at the prices offered by a fence!

The blond girl heard the soft whisper behind her. She quickly turned her head. At first, she did not see the wraithlike crime foe. She saw only the blurred outline of a tenement doorway. Then a darker spot of black separated from the rest and The Whisperer touched her arm.

The girl stifled a scream as the jade-green eyes bored into her.

"Who are you?" The Whisperer's voice was strangely compelling. "And what do you know of Isaac Dejeune?"

The girl's mouth dropped open.

"M-my name is Sophie," she stammered. "J-just Sophie. I don't—"

She had no opportunity to complete her statement. An avalanche of fury swept suddenly from a

nearby doorway in an attack on The Whisperer!

Sophie was shoved aside by the leader of these mobbies—a man who seemed to have no face at all. From his chin to his forehead, there was nothing but a shapeless mask of scar tissue. He snarled oaths of hatred as he pumped lead from a black automatic.

The Whisperer knew of this blank-faced thug. He was called Kid Sulphur. Sometime in the past a dousing with sulphuric acid had destroyed his features. The Whisperer only knew that Kid Sulphur had a doglike obedience to the mysterious master criminal that he was trying to find and destroy.

Kid Sulphur slammed lead at The Whisperer, now! The foe of crime whirled. An eerie chuckle of defiance issued from his lips. The killers closed in around him. Guns blasted and lead fanned his cheeks!

But it was dark in the street. Darkness was not an aid to the gunmen. But it was made to order for The Whisperer. He weaved backward; two queer-looking automatics flashing in his hands. There was no roar of gunfire from the muzzles of those odd weapons.

The only sound was a hissing, as of air released under terrific pressure. Lurid blue flame lanced the darkness. Screams welled up from gangsters as slugs from The Whisperer's supersilenced automatics found their mark.

The mobsters cursed in rage, converged on a blob of darkness that they thought was The Whisperer. But crime's enemy was not there. The killers grappled only with a black coat that had been snatched from a rubbish heap and quickly thrown about an ash barrel.

There was only the eerie, ghostly challenge, a whispering warning, drifting through the night. The Whisperer was gone, leaving the gunmen supreme on that dark sidewalk.

The Whisperer had no time to take those criminals now. He believed that more was to be learned; that crime must be halted in the apartment of Isaac Dejeune, not in this street brawl that might well have been started with the idea of drawing the law's vigilance away from that towering building on Park Avenue.

And The Whisperer was right. Up in the luxurious apartment of Isaac Dejeune, crime was busily at work. Four masked thugs huddled over a large, cumbersome wall safe.

The safe was not as old as octogenarian Isaac Dejeune, but it was of the same era. One thug, with fingertips sanded to painful sensitiveness, twisted the dials. He cursed as the fall of the tumblers eluded him. Then there came a grunt of satisfaction. The door swung slowly open.

Another of the masked mobbies jumped quickly forward. His hand trembled with eagerness as he thrust it into the cavernous interior of the big safe. A drawer turned over. Brilliant stones cascaded to the floor, gleaming in regal splendor as they rolled.

A gasp came from all four of the mobbies. Even their untrained eyes were impressed by the magnificence of those gems. Isaac Dejeune's collection was indeed one that promised to bring a fortune almost beyond imagination.

The thug who had opened the safe chuckled harshly and opened a black bag he had with him. Dozens of stones gleamed from the interior of hat bag, though not quite so brightly as the gems that he scooped from

the safe. But it would have taken an expert to tell them apart.

Unless Isaac Dejeune inspected his gems under a glass, he might remain unaware that this robbery had been committed for quite some time.

Crime's method was simple. Loot was disposed of quite openly before its owners realized it had been stolen! It is well known that many wealthy gem owners wear imitations of the real jewels that they own to thwart robberies. It is also known that some of them cannot tell their imitations from the real ones without the aid of a glass.

"We're still covered up," the leader of the mobsters snarled. His voice was harsh and metallic. There was a gloat of triumph in his tones. "If we can keep it quiet just a little longer, we'll all be millionaires."

Quickly, he began replacing the real gems of the Dejeune collection with the stones he had brought. He repeated his hope that things could remain as they were for just a little more time.

But events were shaping that were to prevent such a plan—events out of the control of the gang forced crime out into the open that night.

Isaac Dejeune returned home unexpectedly. He was supposed to be out of the city. No one will ever know just what caused his premature appearance. The octogenarian importer clicked a key in the lock of his door and stepped suddenly into the room.

Dejeune was a fragile and bent ancient. His eyes were not what they had been in his youth. He blinked unbelievingly for a moment. Then he gasped and darted toward the still-open door. But the old man did not move quite swiftly enough.

With a grating roar, the leader of the thugs leaped upon him. Another quickly shut the door.

The scuffle was brief. But it was too successful for Isaac Dejeune. One skinny hand clutched at the mask of the leader, ripped it away. A brutally twisted face leared at him from where the mask had been. The face was notable because of the eyes. One of them was brown; the other one blue.

Once, the face might have been otherwise handsome. But years of dissipation had made it a mask of brutality. Dasher Kudno was known as a drug addict who was entirely without conscience. He proved it as he glared menacingly at the now trembling old man.

"That was your mistake, leather face," he snarled.

As calmly as if he were practicing with some target, Dasher Kudno whipped out a silenced automatic and murdered Isaac Dejeune! Blood gushed from a hole in the old man's head as he sank wearily to the floor, an inert and motionless form.

One of Dasher Kudno's companions gasped and shot a quick look of fear at his leader.

"The boss won't like this," he said. "This upsets the plans."

Dasher Kudno laughed harshly.

"The boss has thought of everythin'," he snapped. "This was bound to bust out sooner or later, anyhow."

Dasher moved quickly then. He scooped all the gems back into his black bag. He kept the imitations separate from the real gems that had been stolen from Isaac Dejeune's safe. But all were swept back into the bag—all except one tiny emerald that wedged against the door of the safe!

The four mobsters wasted no more time in the apartment of Isaac Dejeune. They moved swiftly to one

window, slid down hand over hand on a knotted rope that had been swung there while Officer Monahan was disposing of the two quarrelsome "drunks."

Dasher Kudno followed his men, down to the darkness of the alley below.

"The smartest series of jewel thefts New York ever had," he gloated. "An' no one even knows that they've been committed!"

A sound of sirens interrupted Dasher Kudno. He surmised that they had either been careless getting out of the window, or perhaps Isaac Dejeune had managed to touch some hidden alarm before he had been killed.

"It don't matter," Dasher sneered. "The cops are too late. An' let them try to figure out that the biggest job of the bunch is still to be pulled off."

CHAPTER II.

A PECULIAR CHANGE.

The Whisperer had been delayed by the street brawl long enough to prevent his intercepting Dasher Kudno and the three thugs. But he was still ahead of the screaming sirens of the police cars.

The mysterious foe of crime slipped into the door of Isaac Dejeune's apartment immediately after Dasher had gone hand over hand down the knotted rope to the dark alley.

The huddled body of the aged importer was a pitiful sight, lying on the deep Persian rug of the foyer. Blood seeped into the rich texture of the carpet. The Whisperer stepped quickly over Dejeune's body, moving silently to the big wall safe.

Instantly, he saw the small emerald that was wedged against the door of the safe. He picked up the gem, examined it closely under a bright light. A soft chuckle burst from his lips as his sharp eyes saw that the gem was synthetic, practically without value.

It seemed that crime had committed an error in leaving behind a bit of evidence as to the intended method of the robbery. But The Whisperer was not too certain that such was the case. The tiny synthetic gem had been plainly in sight.

Had the agents of crime's master mind been careless? Or had this tiny bit of false emerald been left behind deliberately, to accomplish some purpose that would aid the master criminal? The Whisperer did not yet know the answer to that question.

One hand dipped into a pocket, withdrew a small bit of paper. It was the slip that had dropped from the fingers of the girl called Sophie. Idly, The Whisperer looked at it and saw the name and address of Isaac Dejeune.

Then he turned it over. A husky ejaculation of surprise burst from his lips. The jade-green eyes glowed suddenly with a fierce luminescence. Printed on the card were the words:

METRO'S CHARIOT OF FIRE,
BOWERY

Immediately The Whisperer began putting little things together. He knew the shabby mission in the Bowery known as the Chariot of Fire. He knew of the scrawny, sanctimonious owner of the mission, Metro Estange.

The Whisperer thought that the establishment of Metro Estange might be worth investigating. So immersed in thought was he, the pounding of heavy feet in the cor-

ridor outside Dejeune's apartment caught him almost by surprise.

A nasal, whining voice came to the ears of The Whisperer.

"We've got the place surrounded, now. If there are any robbers in there, they won't get away."

The nasal voice belonged to Deputy Police Commissioner Henry Bolton. One of the two ambitions that burned constantly within the breast of Henry Bolton was the capture of The Whisperer. The other ambition, which he was equally unsuccessful in attaining, was to replace Commissioner James Wildcat Gordon as police commissioner.

The Whisperer dived into a bathroom just as Bolton slammed open the door of the apartment.

Bolton was not an attractive personality. His body was huge and clumsy. He had a long, unpleasant nose, close-set eyes, and a round fishlike mouth that made continual gulping motions when he was excited.

The man who trailed Bolton into the apartment was something to take one's breath away. His head was bulletlike and sat on practically no neck at all. He had the barrel chest of a gorilla, the jaw of a bulldog and hands like fielder's mitts. He carried a dictionary under one arm.

"Trucidation for personal aggrandizement," he rumbled in a voice that was like wind roaring in a cave. "Isn't this a mitt full of trouble?"

Bolton groaned.

"Say it in English," he whined, "if you know what it means."

Slug Minor grinned. An ex-longshoreman and now personal chauffeur for Wildcat Gordon, he had long been trying to improve his vocabulary. The annoyance that it constantly caused Henry Bolton made Slug go in for jawbreakers whenever he could remember them.

"Murder for profit, y'u dope," he rumbled. "And there was probably plenty of profit in that wall safe."

Bolton was leaning over the safe. Suddenly, he gulped in surprise. He stood up, holding the tiny false emerald that The Whisperer had replaced. Bolton thought it was genuine.

"They left one jewel behind," he snarled. "Maybe there'll be a fragmentary fingerprint on it."

Bolton didn't seem to realize that whatever latent print there might be on the gem he was obliterating with his own. But his scrutiny was interrupted by the faint sound of water running in the bathroom.

"Somebody's still here," he yelled nasally. "Get going!"

The two men leaped toward the bathroom door through which The Whisperer had disappeared as they entered the apartment.

Bolton whipped open the door. Water dribbled from the shower head. The bathroom was empty. A connecting door led to a bedroom. The bedroom, in turn, opened into the living room which they had just left.

Suddenly, a door slammed and a sharp, staccato voice barked behind Henry Bolton.

"Why don't you look under the bed, Henry? Whatever you're looking for might be there."

Bolton's mouth dropped open in quick protest. The man who strode into the bathroom was clad in a snappily tailored tan gabardine suit and white buck shoes. His eyes were blue and sharp; his jaw as square and hard as a chopping block.

Commissioner James Wildcat Gordon stepped jauntily into the bathroom. Bolton gulped twice. He couldn't think of anything to say;

so he got down on all fours and did look under the bed.

Wildcat Gordon moved quickly in that moment while Henry's attention was distracted. He backed into the living room, whipped up a discarded newspaper, made a quick bundle of black clothing and tucked it under his arm.

The black garments that Wildcat swiftly wrapped into a compact package were the disguise that created The Whisperer! For the black-clad foe of the underworld and Wildcat Gordon were really a single person. Black clothing and spats to cover the white shoes, black powder rubbed into his hair and green contact lenses helped to complete that disguise. The oddly pointed chin and the eerie voice were created by a queer pair of dental plates that Wildcat thrust into his mouth.

Wildcat's father had once been police commissioner. As a boy, Wildcat had heard his father berate the politicians who so often tied his hands. Wildcat had determined that no politicians would curb the investigations of The Whisperer. And none did!

Henry Bolton got up from his search under the bed. He went back into the living room and again picked up the tiny emerald he had found. He handed it to Wildcat.

"They missed one stone," he offered.

Wildcat was about to comment on the fact that the stone was an imitation, but a clatter at the door interrupted him. A uniformed cop from the radio car burst into the room. His face was red with excitement.

"Headquarters has a lead on the gem thefts we been suspecting," he blurted. "They want you right away, commissioner."

"What is the lead?" Wildcat snapped.

The cop blurted words so rapidly that they ran together.

"Maria Corello, the big opera singer," he rasped. "Her one-hundred-thousand-dollar diamond necklace has been switched with a phony. She'd just given it to Jeremiah Stoncut for restringing. She says that Stoncut switched it."

Wildcat's eyes hardened. Jeremiah Stoncut was a jewel expert who handled a large part of the Park Avenue trade. A weird, wizened man, Stoncut was noted for his miserly existence. Wildcat turned back to the cop.

"Where is she?" he demanded.

"At Renlow Walton's apartment. He's her attorney," the cop told him.

"O. K., let's go," Wildcat snapped. He motioned Slug Minor and Bolton to come with him. "Phone Stoncut," he told the cop. "Tell him I want him in Walton's apartment right away."

Wildcat stamped out of the apartment and pressed the elevator button in the hallway.

Renlow Walton, one of the most powerful attorneys in New York, owned an expensive duplex apartment less than two blocks away. Wildcat walked briskly down Park Avenue toward the huge building.

It looked, now, as if crime had been forced out into the open; as if the method of theft had been revealed and would stop the master criminal from operating. But Wildcat Gordon did not think that was true. There was something too easily complete about this clean-up. And from what he, as The Whisperer, had been able to surmise, it seemed that the plan of crime was just beginning. Out in the open, the crime master would be more likely to turn to methods of violence.

Of that much, Wildcat was quite certain.

The doorman of the building in which Renlow Walton maintained his luxurious duplex apartment wore more gold braid than the parade uniform of a navy admiral. He ushered the police commissioner and his aids up to the apartment of the well-known attorney.

Inside, gray-haired, jut-jawed Renlow Walton paced up and down the huge living room with the impatience of a tiger. Renlow Walton was celebrated for the fierceness of his courtroom attacks and for the bulldog tenacity he used in ferreting out information that would win cases for his clients.

Maria Corello, the opera singer, was almost in a state of collapse. Her voice was tinged with hysteria as she rose to confront the police commissioner. Great dark eyes were wide with despair.

"My necklace," she moaned. "Not only is it the money. It has the sentimental value."

She held out a string of flashing gems to Wildcat. The commissioner examined them quickly. He had learned much about gems during this period, when strange, traceless jewels had been appearing in the gem mart of Morrie Manx. He instantly knew that this string was not a diamond necklace. He whipped a jeweler's glass from his pocket, screwed it to one eye. The gems were colorless zircons, heat treated to give the semblance of diamonds. Known to the trade as Matura diamonds, it takes a minute examination by a trained eye to tell them from the genuine stone.

"By accident I discovered it," Maria Corello moaned. "I have friend who is a diamond merchant. He tell me I have been fooled."

Renlow Walton coughed nervously. He adjusted pince-nez to his eyes and glared at Wildcat.

"This thing will be prosecuted to the limit," he roared in stentorian tones. "If Jeremiah Stoncut has been switching gems on his clients, he will go to prison for the maximum term."

Walton shook his mane of iron-gray hair and pounded on a coffee table. His black eyes snapped with anger. He hesitated for just a fraction of a second; then he took a red-stoned ring from his pocket and thrust it under Wildcat's nose.

"Look at this," he roared. "I sent this ring to Stoncut to be cleaned. Look what I got back from him. I just discovered it, though I got it back from him last week."

Wildcat examined the gem under his glass. He breathed on it, watched the film of moisture outline the boundary between the two sections of a fused synthetic stone. The thing was a cheap doublet, made of half ruby and half inexpensive garnet. It was a fake of a type that would escape detection in any casual inspection, a trick of the synthetic-jewel men well known to the trade.

Renlow Walton coughed again. He was interrupted by the soft pur of a muted phone bell at the ornate desk in the living room. He answered the phone, then turned to his guests.

"My daughter," he said simply. "Pardon me a moment."

Walton entered a discussion which seemed to concern a request by his daughter, Gloria, to remain in Vermont a few more days on a vacation which had been expected to terminate that day. While the discussion was going on, Wildcat prowled around the huge living room. He dodged excited questions by Maria Corello as to what direc-

tion prosecution of Jeremiah Stoncut might take.

Wildcat made few answers. He was trying to piece several angles of the strange thefts together. His eyes rested for a moment on the picture of a friendly, weak-chinned youth that rested on a grand piano. Forceful, intolerant Renlow Walton had never been able to understand Jimmy Walton, his only son. Jimmy had run away from home three years before. The lawyer had never been the same since the newspapers carried the story of Jimmy's being killed in jumping from a freight train in the West. The milk of human kindness had dried up in Renlow Walton then, leaving nothing there but acid.

Wildcat turned back again as Walton finished his phone conversation. At the same instant, a houseman announced the arrival of Jeremiah Stoncut, the society jeweler who was under suspicion as a master gem thief.

Stoncut entered the big room with steps that faltered. He was a wisp of a man who would seemingly have blown away in a strong wind. His hair was gray; his face was ashen. His hands were skinny, talonlike. He spoke in a sepulchral voice that sounded as if it came from the grave; a slight, consistent stammer to his words.

"G-grave accusations have been made against me," he intoned, wagging his head nervously.

Renlow Walton was like a huge, gray tomcat with a cornered mouse.

"You'll go to prison for this, Stoncut," he roared. "You've victimized the people who gave you the only living you have ever known." He wagged a stubby finger under Jeremiah Stoncut's nose. "How many other persons have you victimized?"

Stoncut's answer was a surprise. He stammered helplessly.

"F-four others have t-told me today that their g-gems were switched," he faltered "I . . . I . . . I c-can't understand it."

Renlow Walton smiled grimly. He used the courtroom manner for which he had become famous. He was winding up for the kill; for the clincher that would prove his opponent guilty beyond a shadow of doubt.

But another purring bell interrupted him. It was not the phone in the living room. It was a different bell in a room that opened off the larger chamber.

"The private phone in my study," Renlow Walton explained. "I will be but a moment."

The dynamic attorney disappeared into the other room. The low hum of a hushed conversation came to the five persons who waited in the living room. Maria Corello was still in a state bordering on hysteria. She dabbed at her eyes with a lace handkerchief.

Jeremiah Stoncut rubbed dry hands together and looked apologetically at the others. Henry Bolton sneered accusingly at the jewel expert. Wildcat Gordon stared grimly out of one window, wondering if the evidence piling up could be believed. Slug Minor was merely present.

Then they all turned as Renlow Walton reappeared from his study. A great change seemed to have come over the attorney. He ran one finger nervously around inside of his collar. Then he smiled bleakly. A sudden, crafty manner seemed to have come over the dynamic attorney.

"Perhaps we are being hasty," he

mumbled. "Perhaps my good friend, Stoncut, has been victimized. Perhaps—"

Renlow Walton's voice dropped off into a whisper. Something had obviously occurred to make the forceful, dominating lawyer change his tune. Wildcat Gordon's eyes hardened as he surveyed the attorney. Suddenly he whipped out two questions.

"Isn't it true, Walton, that Isaac Dejeune and Miss Corello have both been close friends of yours?" Wildcat snapped. "Is it not also true that you knew well the layout of both apartments and where their jewels were kept?"

Henry Bolton gasped. Such insinuation against a man of the political connections of Renlow Walton was unheard of to Henry. He would as soon have shoved his neck in a noose.

But there was no explosion from the gray-haired attorney. Sweat broke out on his forehead. He nodded slowly.

"It is true," he murmured. "In due time I will make my answers. Right now, I request that you all leave my apartment."

Wildcat Gordon looked sharply to see if there was a sly smile on the saturnine lips of Jeremiah Stoncut. The faltering jeweler's features were totally without expression.

CHAPTER III.
DECREE OF DEATH.

Wildcat Gordon left the palatial apartment building alone. He sent Bolton and Slug Minor back to headquarters. Jeremiah Stoncut, he left to his own devices. Wildcat had several things to do.

His brow creased with irritation as he strode into a cigar-store phone booth. The pretty face of a dark-haired girl loomed in his mind. The blue eyes of Tiny Traeger, daughter of Wildcat's best friend, troubled Wildcat, even though he could not see them.

Had not Wildcat been firmly of the conviction that the crime-fighting existence he had chosen for himself was one that was too dangerous for a woman to share, he would have admitted that his feeling toward Tiny was more than friendship. But as it was, the relationship of Wildcat and the daughter of retired deputy Richard Traeger was one best described as armed neutrality.

Wildcat dialed the phone number of the penthouse apartment of old Quick Trigger, as the retired deputy was known to his friend. He got Quick on the wire and asked for Tiny. The rumbling voice of the older man informed him that Tiny was motoring in Westchester and was not expected for at least an hour.

Wildcat grunted in displeasure. Quick knew that Tiny had been in telephonic communication with a feminine denizen of the underworld known as Sophie. He had heard her warn the mysterious Sophie to be careful, lest she get into trouble.

Both men knew the penchant the dark-eyed Tiny had for defending the feminine underdogs in this world. In fact, they encouraged it. Tiny had brought more than one wayward soul back to the path of decency. But this time, Wildcat realized the situation was different.

"That girl is involved in a murder," he barked into the phone. "I'll have to cross-examine Tiny and find out who she is."

Quick Trigger grunted and said it would have to keep until Tiny came back to the city, but Wildcat

Gordon had other ideas on the subject.

"Looks like a job for The Whisperer," he said flatly. "I think I know where I can find this girl, Sophie."

It was Quick Trigger's turn to groan. A master at disguise, he had manufactured the queer dental plates that gave the pointed chin and chilling voice to The Whisperer. And Quick lived in a fearful certainty that sometime soon The Whisperer would get himself into a spot from which he would not emerge—alive.

But Wildcat hung up before Quick could voice his objections. He pulled from his pocket the slip of paper on which was inscribed the words: Metro's Chariot of Fire, Bowery. That queer mission was the immediate destination of The Whisperer. There were certain peculiar qualities of the salvation offered by Metro Estange that made the foe of crime decide that a key to this crime wave could be found there.

The black coupé was parked only two blocks away. Wildcat slid behind the wheel and kicked the motor into life. He drove rapidly, one hand on the wheel. The fingers of the other hand quickly adjusted green contact lenses to his eyes. Tiny sutures of invisible tape gave the eyes their Oriental slant. Black powder was rubbed into his hair. The odd dental plates slipped into Wildcat's mouth.

Then the black coupé was driven by The Whisperer, the long arm of justice.

He left his coupé under the roaring elevated on the Bowery. Cheap saloons, pawnshops and clothing stores lined the dingy thoroughfare. A block away, a sign proclaimed that Metro's Chariot of Fire saved souls.

THE WHISPERER

● A low, mirthless chuckle, an awesome whisper of defiance, as a half-visible wraith moves through the night. Criminals flee at this eerie challenge, for it announces the arrival of the mysterious nemesis of crime, for whom there are no rules or regulations deterrent in the path of justice—The Whisperer.

The Whisperer knew that Metro advertised his mission as a second fiery chariot, like the one in which Elijah rode to heaven. The hymn, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," was the theme song of the shabby haven of derelicts.

The mysterious foe of crime paused only once on that last block—a garish place called the Den of Aces. The Den of Aces was a gambling dive without an honest wheel in the house. The police had

closed it up a score of times, but some power high in politics always managed to have the license reinstated. It was one place that The Whisperer intended to personally close up, in time. But right now, Metro's Chariot of Fire was of greater importance in his war against criminals.

He turned into the Chariot of Fire and padded into the main meeting hall. The place smelled rankly of desolation. Dim, yellow lights washed wanly down on hopeless faces that were lined with years of despair. As in most missions on the desolate fringes of urban civilization, most of them were old men and women, to whom the life at hand offered but little.

And, as in most other missions of its type, there was a scrawny ghost of a man preaching a sermon on salvation. He was skinny and wrinkled; his cheeks were pinched and his neck stringy, as if he had not partaken of sufficient food to fill his body.

Metro Estange's thin, pointed nose seemed to seek out each individual sinner in his flock as he spoke of the hope that lay in the hereafter for them. Then he sat down at a dilapidated pump organ and ground out the verse of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." At its conclusion, the formal meeting seemed to be finished by an accepted signal, known to all.

It was then that The Whisperer noticed the one thing that set the Chariot of Fire apart from other missions of its type. The regenerate oldsters were a part of this shabby sinkhole of salvation. But, unlike other missions, here they were distinctly in a minority.

The greater part of the assemblage was made up of dapper youngsters. Some were expensively dressed; others were cheaply flashy in their attire. But they had one thing in common: their attitude, individually and collectively, was one of constant contempt. It was as if all this atmosphere of sanctity was a fraud in which they all took part.

A soft, chuckling whisper came from the lips of the black-clad foe of crime. Then he felt a gentle pressure against his elbow. He looked up, into the inscrutable black eyes of the evangelist, Metro Estange.

The scrawny little soul saver rubbed his hands together unctuously. Thin, bluish lips stretched into a fleeting smile.

"I am honored," he said in a hollow voice peculiarly absent of expression and inflection. "If The Whisperer has come to me for guidance, it will be a great example for our weaker brethren."

Metro Estange nodded his almost hairless dome in indication that he would like to have The Whisperer follow him to more private quarters for conversation. The nemesis of crime arose and followed the skinny evangelist with silent tread.

The Whisperer noted the sneering insolence of the younger members of that congregation as he padded by. These young hangers-on of the underworld seemed smugly confident that they were safe from enemies. That there was something distrustful in the Chariot of Fire, The Whisperer was certain; but whether Metro Estange was a part of it, he could not yet be sure.

Metro led him into an office that was even more shabby than the meeting hall outside. The evangelist seated himself carefully in a padded armchair. He brought the tips of his fingers together as if he were about to pray. Then he spoke, with his peculiar lack of any expression

or inflection. It was like food without any tinge of flavor.

"It is the young ones that concern me," Metro Estange said. "I fear that they are following evil paths. It is you who could set an example for them."

The Whisperer's green eyes flickered strangely. This was not the approach he had expected from Metro Estange. A soft hiss of surprise escaped his lips, but otherwise he was silent. Metro acknowledged the whisper of surprise with a nod. Then the evangelist went on.

"I have fed their bodies," he said with a sad shake of his almost hairless skull. "But I fear that their souls have resisted."

Metro arose, then, with a queer, impoverished sort of dignity. As if dismissing The Whisperer, he said: "Give this thought, my friend: See if you cannot find your way to set the example to them that may save them from the treacherous road of crime."

The green eyes of the compact figure bored into Metro Estange, and a hissing breath escaped his lips.

"I will give many things some thought, my friend," he said. "Right now, I must go."

The Whisperer glided out of Metro Estange's office and through the main mission hall. His sharp green eyes saw familiar figures among the washed-out oldsters who sat dejectedly around the ill-heated hall. Some of those, he knew, *were* underworld characters who had genuinely reformed!

Some of them would swear—and truthfully—that Metro Estange had showed them the way from crime to honest living.

Those things The Whisperer knew. They had previously caused him to think that perhaps Metro Estange was really honest in his conduct of this shabby mission.

The presence of the hard-eyed, sneering youths was something else. The two aspects of the Chariot of Fire did not square with each other.

The Whisperer reflected upon those conflicting aspects as he stepped from the Bowery mission. Then he ran into the one person he had come here to find. He actually collided with the blond girl named Sophie, as she started to enter Metro Estange's door.

The girl's blue eyes widened in sudden fear as she recognized The Whisperer. A gasp of astonishment burst from her lips. She recoiled instinctively and began to run. Steel fingers gripped her arm and whirled her around.

"I have much to talk to you about," the black-clad fighter said.

But The Whisperer was mistaken. Once more, Kid Sulphur swooped down to prevent his questioning the girl.

A snarl of defiance curled on Kid Sulphur's lips as his henchmen converged upon the crime foe!

The supersilenced pistols of The Whisperer leaped into his hands. Their blue flame cut the night in lurid stabs. Kid Sulphur's gangsters yelled in sudden fear.

The Whisperer backed, a grim chuckle of battle on his lips. He weaved and dodged lead that slammed from blazing guns. He was fighting an onslaught that he well understood. If it had been simply a struggle between Kid Sulphur and his aids and himself, The Whisperer could have won it.

But reinforcements came to crime in a direction that The Whisperer did not expect. As he backed from the lethal attack, he fell right into the hands of Dasher Kudno and a

mob of killers executing a flanking movement.

The Whisperer was caught between two lines of fire. He whirled, tried to cut in the one direction that would have permitted him access to freedom. But the mobbies had been smart; they had carefully planned their maneuver.

A thin, almost invisible wire was stretched across the one narrow alley in which The Whisperer might have entrenched himself for a finish fight. He tripped and was hurled full length on the cobblestones of the dark passageway. In an instant, the snarling gunmen hurled themselves upon his helpless figure. Flat automatics smashed against his skull! His brain whirled in a hazy fog.

But The Whisperer was not unconscious. He had rolled with the blows of the flailing gun butts to escape their smashing force, and now his dazed brain cleared gradually.

Dasher Kudno stepped quickly forward, a sneer of hate upon his lips. Dasher took control of the mob. Apparently, he was a superior to all of them, including the scar-faced Kid Sulphur.

In the melee, the blond girl had faded into the night. She was nowhere in sight.

Dasher Kudno kicked The Whisperer viciously.

"Fools like Metro Estange may be impressed by him," he snarled. "But our boss knows how to deal with meddlers who stick their noses into other people's business."

"Yeah," another mobbie grunted. "The boss is smart, having us hang out with skinny Metro. In the wash-up, he'll take the fall."

The gang was quiet for a moment. They gathered around the seemingly inert form of The Whisperer so that casual bystanders would not notice his presence. Dasher went off to find a phone. It seemed that further orders were now necessary.

From the conversation, it appeared to The Whisperer that Metro Estange was no more than a dupe in the plans of a master criminal who swept all before him.

Dasher Kudno cut short his thoughts. The leering killer swaggered as he came back from his phone call. A twisted sneer of elation was on his lips.

"We bump The Whisperer!" he snarled. "Then the boss will impersonate him. That'll give him complete control of things. Everybody'll be afraid of him."

CHAPTER IV.
HIGH-VOLTAGE TORTURE!

The thug who had sneered at Metro Estange's dumbness laughed harshly. He was a vacant-eyed, jittery youth. He began to hum the first few bars of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." Then he grinned knowingly.

Dasher Kudno laughed, too.

"You're a card, Cokey," Dasher grated. "As soon as the boss arrives, we'll feed this guy to the chariot of fire."

An attitude of tense expectation was apparent among the mobbies. They were all quite young. And obviously they were tremendously impressed by the ruthless cleverness of their boss.

"What a sense of humor the boss has got," Cokey blurted. "Coppin' Metro's name for his gadget."

There was a little awe in Cokey's voice; an equal amount of it in the hushed tones of the other youthful hoods. From their conversation, it developed that the master crook's chariot of fire was a death device actuated by electrodes and terrific voltage.

It also developed that young mobsters who displeased the boss wound up sitting in it. A soft chuckle came from the lips of The Whisperer with this revelation.

Such a thing explained one manifestation of crime that had so far baffled the police department: Bodies burned beyond recognition or identification had recently been found floating in the East River. These, according to the hushed conversation of the young gunmen, were the charred warnings of the boss to others that he was not a man who could be crossed with any degree of safety.

The mob was moving over darkened streets as they talked in low tones. Four of them carried The Whisperer between them. The Whisperer was bound, now, and the gag that had been thrust in his mouth partly covered his face in order that he should not see where he was being taken. They boosted him along as if he were a friend who had taken a few too many shots of the rotgut liquor served in the dives of the Bowery.

When they passed casual pedestrians, they talked thickly as if they were also drunk. But it was a precaution scarcely needed. This was not a district where people, who desired to go on living, asked many questions. Dasher Kudno grunted as they approached the East River water front. They came to a narrow catwalk that bridged the distance from the street to an ancient dock.

"Here we are," he muttered. "The old fish house."

It was then that The Whisperer made his final bid for freedom. He had managed to work the blindfold from his eyes and free his wrists. His two fists snapped upward like small pistons, smashing into the jaws of two of the youths who held him!

The attack had surprise as an advantage. The two gangsters were tumbled to the street. Then the wraithlike figure whirled like a windstorm in the night. Fists found flesh and bone. Groans of surprise blurted from smashed lips; oaths ripped out into the night as the gunmen rallied. The Whisperer slammed his fists home again and again. But there were too many gunmen for any one man to fight to freedom though the wraithlike fighter had been able to hold his ground for several minutes. The mob milled in an ever-closing circle and The Whisperer slumped again, unconscious.

Dasher Kudno grunted as bonds were retied, the gag reset between strong teeth and the blindfold replaced.

"Hell!" Dasher rasped. "This guy can scrap. Too bad he ain't one of us."

There was further discussion of the fighting ability of The Whisperer as the mob hauled the now tightly bound figure across a wharf and into an innocent-looking shack near the river.

Dasher Kudno led the mob. He seemed the only one who knew just what to do to get into the hideaway. He pressed a loose board near the ceiling of the shack. A section of the floor rose slowly on a hinge.

The mobbies skidded their burden down a narrow, slippery flight of stairs into a pit of blackness. Dasher closed the trapdoor above them and flicked on his light. The stairs seemed to end in a blank, dripping wall of masonry. The other hoods stood about, waiting for Dasher to make further progress possible.

Kudno grinned. He was obviously enjoying the impression he was mak-

ing on his henchmen. Dasher, it seemed, was the one member of the gang trusted by the boss. None of them—unless it were Dasher—knew the identity of the mysterious master of crime. If Dasher knew, his conversation gave no hint of it.

Dasher, either by order, or because it pleased him, remained inscrutable to his own assistants. Now, the cruel-faced gangster took a peculiar-looking tuning fork from his pocket. He struck it with his flashlight.

A weird, sharp note rang into the air. Immediately, a whir of machinery sounded. The tone of the tuning fork was the only key that would unlock the masonry entrance to the subterranean stronghold. Slowly, a large section of masonry began to turn on a cleverly arranged pivot.

The chamber into which Dasher Kudno led them then would have been the envy of a torturer of the Spanish Inquisition. Dim, hidden lights illumined the dungeonlike vault with a weird yellow glow. Torture devices that looked as if they had been torn from the pages of medieval history lined the walls.

Any thought that they were there solely for visual effect was erased by the sight of bloodstains on some of them. But the place of honor was given over to the device the gangsters termed, "the chariot of fire."

Heavy copper cables led to the machine from huge glass insulators. There were heavy straps similar to those on the electric chair in Sing Sing. The thing was an electric chair of sorts, though it was roughly shaped like a chariot. Instead of the conventional electrodes, the power cables terminated in an interlocking mesh of wires built into the general shape of a man.

Even cold and dead, the thing held fear for the young gangsters. They seemed to shrink from stepping too closely to the machine. It was to iron ringbolts in the masonry floor near the death device that they hauled and manacled their captive.

Scar-faced Kid Sulphur stood erect. He seemed to have a particular hate for The Whisperer. He prodded the recumbent figure with his foot. Then he turned to Dasher Kudno.

"Where's Cokey?" he inquired. "I thought he was going to be with us."

"Special job for the boss," Kudno growled. "I heard him get his orders earlier tonight."

Kid Sulphur glanced at the chariot of fire.

"When's the boss going to give it to The Whisperer?" he asked.

Kudno shrugged.

"When he gets ready. You don't ask the boss questions about what he's goin' to do."

Kid Sulphur said he was well aware of that. He was about to say something else when a rasping sound, like static, issued from a vent in the ceiling of the vault. The static ceased and a harsh, metallic voice grated through a loud-speaker. At the sound of it, every mobster in the dungeon snapped erect.

It was the boss!

"You will bring Kid Sulphur to me in the upper level," the voice grated. "I fear his tongue has been wagging unnecessarily."

A sudden hush fell over the gangsters. Some of them glanced instinctively at the death machine. There was no color in the scar-tissue face of Kid Sulphur to drain at the thought of fearful death. But the gang lieutenant shuddered as if

a chill wind had suddenly enveloped him.

Dasher Kudno whipped out a gun.

"You will lead, Sulphur," he grated. "One wrong move and I blast you!"

Kid Sulphur went through the aperture in the masonry wall with Dasher Kudno's gun two inches from his spine.

Another hidden passageway, at the level of the stairs above, took them to the chamber referred to as the upper level. It proved to be a huge, barnlike room that was partly above the surface of the water. Windows like portholes were near the ceiling.

There was nothing in the room; not even a chair or table. One end seemed to be screened off from the rest. Two tiny holes were bored through the screen. Through these, a pair of glittering eyes gleamed strangely. The lighting was so arranged that not even the color of the eyes was discernible.

Dasher Kudno shoved Kid Sulphur in front of those two holes. Then Dasher stepped back respectfully. Behind Dasher ranged the rest of the mob.

The metallic voice began to speak. The master criminal still used a loud-speaker. It effectively disguised the voice. The diaphragm was tightened up so much that the voice did not even sound human.

"It seems that someone else has learned a secret that should exist just between you and myself, Sulphur," the tinny voice rasped. "Each of you and your master have secrets that not even the rest of our group is to know. You all understand that. You all understand the penalty for violating that arrangement."

There was a hushed silence for a moment. Kid Sulphur hung his head. As he raised it, stark terror shone from his black eyes. The scar tissue of his face had no sweat glands to react; his face seemed to burn with a consuming heat. But Kid Sulphur's black eyes returned the glare that came from the twin holes in the screen.

"I have told no one," he rasped. "Whoever says that I have is lying."

A harsh cough came from the metallic speaker. There was a distinct sneer in the words that next issued from it.

"Very well, then. If the girl learned our secret without your telling her she must be a spy. She will be disposed of to my liking. There is no place in my organization for a romance between my men and the women of the underworld."

Kid Sulphur seemed to sway just slightly. Then a rasping oath spat from his scarred lips. His voice rose to a thin scream of rage. Saliva dribbled from his lips as he plunged madly toward the two holes in the screen!

The metallic voice laughed sneeringly. A puff of whitish gas whiffed from one of the eyeholes in the screen into Kid Sulphur's face. The scarred gangster stumbled. Then he collapsed on the floor. The sneering voice continued.

"Take him, Dasher," the boss instructed. "He will think better of his actions when he has cooled off. I will be merciful with Kid Sulphur." He laughed nastily. "I still have use for his peculiar talents."

CHAPTER V.

GEMS UNDER SCRUTINY.

The girl called Sophie slipped quietly into a cigar store, not far from Metro's Chariot of Fire. Her hard eyes made swift inspection of the dingy store. The proprietor,

huddled over a daily racing form, scarcely noticed that the girl had come in at all.

Sophie moved swiftly to the three phone booths in the rear. Her searching glance informed her that all of them were empty. With a tight smile of satisfaction, she slid into one of them and closed the door.

The phones were of the dial type. The act of obtaining her number occupied Sophie's entire attention for a few seconds. In those seconds, a quick, furtive figure slipped into the store and glided to the booth adjoining Sophie. The girl did not see the new arrival. She could not see him once he was in the booth. The tiny cubicles were separated by frosted glass.

The nearly opaque panels created a semblance of privacy. Actually, the truth was the opposite. The effect of privacy encouraged callers to speak more loudly than they would if they could see that adjoining booths were occupied.

Sophie's voice was tense with excitement when she got her number.

"Tiny?" she breathed. Then she spoke quickly when she received an affirmative answer. "I think I've found what I was looking for, Tiny, but I don't quite know what to do."

Sophie paused for a moment.

"That man they call The Whisperer has tried to seize me twice," she confided. "He—"

A gasp from the other end of the telephone interrupted Sophie. The voice of her confidante grew tense, insistent. Then there was a pause, as if the speaker on the other end of that phone was ascertaining whether she was being overheard.

And such actually was the case. The girl speaking to Sophie was pert, brunet Tiny Traeger, the pretty daughter of the retired deputy who was known to his intimates as old Quick Trigger.

Tiny was speaking from the penthouse apartment that Quick maintained atop an old warehouse on the Hudson River water front. The living room was large and tastefully furnished. Tiny's dark eyes quickly surveyed her father who was cleaning and oiling two huge revolvers at the other end of the room. The guns were slightly larger than the old six-shooters that cowboys used to carry in the West.

Quick Trigger seemed paying no attention to his daughter. The old man was tall, gaunt and totally bald except for two tufts of gray above his ears. He seemed to squint, as if he had difficulty in seeing what he was doing. Many criminals had been fooled by the nearsighted appearance of old Quick. Most of them had landed either in prison or on a marble slab in the morgue. Quick Trigger saw more than most people.

Apparently satisfied that Quick was busy, Tiny returned to the phone.

"Trust The Whisperer," she breathed into the mouthpiece. "He is a peculiar and mysterious figure of the underworld. But he has been helpful in cases that I have known. I am sure he would not betray you."

There was an odd insistence in Tiny Traeger's voice. Her words would have annoyed Quick Trigger. Neither he nor Wildcat Gordon was ever quite sure how much Tiny knew or suspected of the disguise that created The Whisperer. Both were determined that she should not possess information that would be dangerous for her to know. They were certain that if the underworld thought she knew the identity of The Whisperer, she would be kidnaped and tortured until she revealed that information.

The girl's eyes widened as she recognized The Whisperer. Steel fingers gripped her arm.

Sophie listened to Tiny Traeger's arguments without comment. Her blue eyes narrowed, seemed undecided. She shook her head, as if she could not bring herself to trust completely any figure of the underworld.

"I . . . I will try to contact The Whisperer," she said finally. "I . . . I'll tell him some of the things I suspect."

Then her voice hardened in decision.

"But there are certain things I cannot tell him," she said flatly. "There are some things no one must know."

Sophie pronged the receiver of the pay-station phone and stepped out into the store. The girl might have looked back and checked again on those phone booths to be sure she had not been observed or overheard. But the figure she saw on the street outside brought a gasp of astonishment from her lips and caused her to forget about phones and phone booths.

The thin, grayish figure of Jeremiah Stoncut padded down the street. The skinny jewel expert's talonlike hand rubbed his chin nervously. He stammered to himself in his low, sepulchral voice.

Sophie moved swiftly to the entrance of the store, flattened herself against the display window. There was no light in the entrance; the girl was almost invisible in the darkness. She held her breath, watching and listening.

"The j-jewels—" Stoncut muttered to himself. "Re-c-c-cut. B-but they might still be i-i-identified."

Stoncut wagged his grayish head and padded down the street like some skinny ghost. Sophie moved silently after him.

And behind her, the door of the other phone booth opened A furtive, youthful gangster slipped out, glided just as silently out into the street and followed the girl. There was a hard, cruel grin on his thin lips.

Jeremiah Stoncut turned a corner, still wagging his head as if some unforeseen contingency had aroused fear in his brain. He looked ahead, nodded to himself in some apparent decision. Sophie looked in the same direction. Then she gasped again.

Ahead of Jeremiah Stoncut there was only one establishment lighted and open to receive visitors. It was the wholesale jewel clearing house of Morrie Manx, the midget; Morrie Manx, suspected of being the most daring fence for precious stones that had ever worked New York!

Morrie, the midget, was dividing his time, at that moment, between two pursuits. One of them was reading an early edition of a morning tabloid. The headlines screamed the details of the murder of Isaac Dejeune.

Further down in the story there were facts concerning the discovery of false jewels by Maria Corello, the opera singer, and by Renlow Walton. The paper mentioned the fact that both of those persons had recently received synthetic jewels from Jeremiah Stoncut in return for expensive gems which had been left with him for repair.

The paper mentioned other jewels that had been found to be replaced by synthetics after Stoncut had worked on them. There was considerable conjecture and accusation against Stoncut.

Morrie Manx clucked softly to himself and shifted on the chair he was standing on. Next to the opened tabloid was a huge tray of sparkling gems. Morrie turned to that,

screwed a jeweler's glass into the socket of one eye. He was completely absorbed in a minute examination of the gems for several moments.

Then he clucked again in satisfaction.

"No proof," he mumbled. "And there won't be any proof."

Morrie's little eyes hardened to tiny points of concentration. The evil grin on his face gave the impression that he was mentally adding up potential stolen profits. Then his expression changed slightly. Popular music was coming from a small radio on the counter beside him. Suddenly the music stopped. A news announcer cut in on the program.

"Bulletin from police headquarters," the announcer barked. *"Tifton's jewelry store on Fifth Avenue has just been robbed in one of the most spectacular jewel holdups in years. One watchman was shot to death. Windows and showcases were ruined and nearly a quarter of a million dollars in jewels has been stolen.*

"Grapevine information from sources usually held to be reliable by this commentator indicates that the murder of Isaac Dejeune tonight marks the beginning of a wave of violent crime in our city. The police had better get on their toes, or there will be some new officials in the department before many days have passed."

Morrie Manx chuckled hoarsely. Then he looked up as the door of his establishment swung open. Swiftly, he shut off the radio, closed the paper he had been reading.

The skinny figure of Jeremiah Stoncut stalked into the room. The jewel expert looked even more like an overdue resident of a grave than usual. Morrie smiled oddly and rubbed his hands together. He made no attempt to hide the jewels on the counter. He bowed, still grinning.

"Ah, my place is honored to have a visit from so noted an expert on precious stones," the midget smirked. "I shall be delighted to be of service."

Jeremiah Stoncut's reply was a hollow, half-audible grunt. He minced over to the tray of jewels beside Morrie Manx. Swiftly, he adjusted his jeweler's glass and scrutinized gem after gem. Stoncut's mouth worked strangely as he completed his inspection. He dropped the glass from his eye and looked up at the midget. It seemed as if a look of understanding passed between those two. But no words were spoken.

A slight gasp came from the doorway. Sophie, the hard-eyed blonde, was staring at Stoncut and the midget. A grim expression of decision was on her face. Suddenly, she whirled and raced out into the street. Her steps were firm now, her direction set.

"I will find The Whisperer," she said to herself. "He might be at the Chariot of Fire."

The girl's eyes glowed as if she suddenly had discovered the answer to some secret.

But the eyes of the youthful thug who followed her also gleamed. The smile on the lips of the young mobbie was hard and cruel. Crime was again on the march!

CHAPTER VI.

THE WHISPERER SUSPECTED.

And the heavy footprint of crime had smashed down on staid Fifth Avenue with devastating effect. Window glass littered the street out-

side the elite establishment of Tifton Co., jewelers.

Jewels scattered about the sidewalk indicated the haste with which the ruthless criminals had acted. Inside of Tifton's, showcases were shattered. Lights gleamed throughout the building, now. The huddled form of one watchman lay cold in death in the center of the main showroom. In a smaller room in the rear, another watchman struggled slowly back to consciousness. Four other persons were in the room with him.

Deputy Henry Bolton and Slug Minor represented the police department. The sudden onslaught of crime had brought the mayor from his home to the scene of theft and murder. The mayor looked sternly at the fourth man in the room.

Renlow Walton paced up and down as Slug Minor revived the watchman who had been slugged into unconsciousness. Walton's mane of iron-gray hair was tousled and unkempt. His pince-nez were crooked on his nose. His shoulders were no longer erect and defiant. They were slumped in an attitude of dejection. He mumbled to himself.

"No, no. Not this," he moaned.

The mayor snapped words at him.

"Someone who knew the possessions and the habits of people of wealth on Park Avenue started this reign of crime, Walton; someone to whom the chance of discovery was worth taking."

Walton paused, stared blank-eyed at the chief executive of the city. He said nothing for a moment. The mayor pressed his point.

"I am forced to report that I know you have recently suffered serious financial reverses in Wall Street," he bored into Renlow Walton. "That is true, is it not?"

Walton's lips worked strangely. He seemed about to protest, then changed his mind.

"Yes. It is so," he said in a low voice.

Pain crossed the features of the mayor. He was an honest man. But he did not like crime that reached high in finance and politics. Political success is, of necessity, a matter of some compromise. It now seemed to the mayor that crime, started in one direction, had gotten out of hand; perhaps beyond the control of its original perpetrator. The mayor needed help. Walton seemed ill at ease in his presence. Quietly, he slipped out of the door.

"Where is Wildcat Gordon?" the mayor rapped suddenly. "He should be on the job in a thing like this."

Henry Bolton smirked.

"Wildcat hasn't been paying much attention to his job lately," he offered.

Slug Minor rumbled in protest. He nervously fingered the big dictionary he still carried under his arm.

"A hyperbolical evasion," he growled. "If not actual pettifoggery."

Bolton's mouth dropped open.

"W-what—" he began.

"You're exaggeratin' plenty, Henry," Slug rapped. "And maybe deliberately lyin'."

Bolton jumped up and down in rage. He screamed that he'd have Slug thrown off the Force. But Henry was interrupted. At that moment, the unconscious watchman began to stir. His eyelids flickered, his pain-twisted lips began to move.

"All dressed in black—" he moaned, half-conscious. "Green eyes that were slanted. He—"

An exclamation of astonishment burst from Bolton's lips. He leaned over, shook the watchman until he opened his eyes and sat up.

"Who led the gang?" Bolton demanded. "What did he look like?"

The watchman described in greater detail the leader who had commanded the murderous thugs in the robbery. There was no question in the minds of any of the men present when he had finished.

There was no other man in New York who answered that description.

"The Whisperer!" Bolton gasped. "At last, he is out in the open. This time we'll get him!"

The mayor at once assumed command.

"Get Wildcat," he snapped. "Get every available man on the Force on the job at once."

Bolton dived for a phone on a desk in a corner. Impatiently, he dialed the number of Quick Trigger's penthouse apartment.

Quick Trigger did not answer the phone immediately. He let an automatic recording device take down whatever message the caller might want to leave. Quick, at the moment was busy.

The gaunt retired deputy was looking into a complex mirror arrangement built on the principle of a periscope. A figure familiar to old Quick was approaching the lower entrance. Quick pressed the button which lighted a signal in the lower lobby. The signal informed the visitor that he should come right up to the penthouse. Simultaneously, the sliding door of the elevator opened to admit the new arrival.

Then Quick turned to Tiny. The pretty girl was reading a novel at the other end of the room.

"I'd like to have you finish that in your room," Quick said simply. "I have a visitor."

Reluctantly, but with immediate obedience, Tiny rose and went to her room. This scene was frequently reenacted between Tiny and her father. Tiny knew of a black-clad, long-chinned visitor from the underworld that her father often received. Quick had told her that he was some vague person named Dunk Smith who was an important contact, a source of information for old Quick.

Tiny was not supposed to know that the black-clad man who came in so often was really The Whisperer. She was not supposed to know that. But Quick often wondered just how much the girl really suspected.

"Get coffee for him, dad," Tiny said with a trace of humor in her voice. "You'll find the percolator on the stove."

With that, Tiny disappeared. Quick turned toward the elevator. The whir of the machinery sounded from the shaft, then stopped. Quick stepped forward as the door of the elevator cage opened. There was a smile on his lips.

But that smile quickly faded. A rumbling roar bellowed from Quick Trigger's throat. His hands pawed at the huge revolvers that he habitually carried with him.

The man who stepped from the cage *did* look like The Whisperer. But instantly, Quick Trigger knew that it was not. Four youthful gunmen leaped out beside him. One swung a gun butt at Quick Trigger's head. It smashed savagely against his skull. Quick staggered and fell to his knees. A grating voice came from the false Whisperer. The crook seemed to have marbles or some other obstruction in his mouth to disguise his voice.

"Your daughter knows too much, goat-face," he snarled. "We overheard a phone call to her. Trot her out!"

Tiny's voice from the other end

JAMES "WILDCAT" GORDON

• Wildcat Gordon, New York's youngest police commissioner, is known for his hard-hitting, unorthodox methods for solving crime. As The Whisperer, there are no rules, no interfering politicians to decree how a case is to be solved and slow the swift path of justice.

of the room was as calm and steady as if the situation were quite normal.

"She is trotted out!" Tiny said flatly. "And one move from any of you will be your last one."

They all turned. Tiny Traeger stood defiant, a pearl-handled automatic in her hand!

The false Whisperer shrugged, started to raise his hands as if in defeat. Then with one swift underhand throw, he hurled his own automatic the full length of the room. It smashed against the pearl-handled gun in Tiny's hand, slammed it to the floor.

With a grating roar, the black-clad crook tore across the room, plunged against Tiny Traeger. Then he had his hands full. Quick Trigger had taught his daughter how to box. The phony Whisperer finally tied the girl, but there were red welts on his face before he succeeded. He stood up then, snarling.

"You will pay for that, sister. And at my leisure." He turned toward the elevator. "Now, you'll see how lucky you were that you didn't shoot. Come out, Dasher."

Dasher Kudno stepped out of the elevator. He carried a Tommy-gun cradled in his arm.

"I almost let her have it at that," Dasher sneered. "What's the difference? Dames like her are a dime a dozen."

The false Whisperer ignored the question. He gave orders to Dasher.

"Bind and gag them," he rapped "Then take them upstate. I will want to question them both before they die. Now, I have things to do."

With a swagger of contempt, he strode to the elevator. Dasher directed the work of tying the unconscious Quick Trigger and shoving a gag into Tiny Traeger's mouth. By that time, the elevator had returned to the penthouse level. The two prisoners were dragged into the cage.

At street level, they were hauled out to the curb. The vehicle parked there was a hearse, bearing the name of a well-known mortuary. Dasher laughed shortly and commented on the appropriateness of using a hearse to transport the victims. Then Quick and Tiny were shoved into it.

Dasher drove, taking the Express

Highway on the West Side to Westchester County. Beyond Yonkers, Dasher cut over to Central Avenue. There, a peculiar procedure was adopted by the gang lieutenant.

He carefully blindfolded his three assistants and shoved them in the back with Quick Trigger and Tiny!

It was apparent that only Dasher was to know the exact location of the out-of-town hide-out of the czar of crime!

The hearse rumbled on, making many turns. It seemed that Dasher doubled back, retracing roads already traveled to prevent any of the occupants of the hearse from guessing the route he drove. Finally, he stopped and opened the rear doors of the hearse. Then he untied his youthful henchmen.

"All out," he rasped. "This is the end of the line."

They untied the feet of Quick and Tiny. Quick had recovered consciousness by that time. Both captives were roughly shoved along a gravel path toward a sprawling building that loomed dimly in the gloom of night.

Dasher nudged one of his pals and grinned. He pushed Quick and Tiny up a wide flight of steps. A huge colonial-type door seemed to lead into the building. As Quick approached it, a low hum sounded in the air. There was a scent of ozone, indicating a sudden passage through the air of high-frequency electricity. Blue sparks shot from the handle of the door! Instinctively, Quick recoiled.

Dasher laughed raucously and twisted an ornamental wooden knob on the porch railing. Instantly, a panel in the wooden siding beside the door swung back and a light flashed on. The light revealed that the wooden siding was backed with shiny steel!

Again, Quick and Tiny were pushed on ahead. A narrow corridor lay before them. There was a doorway at the end, thirty feet or more away. But they didn't reach that. Midway in the passage, the floor beneath them began to sink. Both prisoners and captors seemed to sway uncertainly through space. Then the lights went out.

When a dim luminescence again lighted their way, Quick could see that they were in a large room without any apparent means of ingress or exit. A faint stir of air indicated that some system of air conditioning brought ventilation to the chamber. Quick and Tiny were lashed to two metal chairs.

Dasher Kudno sneered at them.

"You two will burn with this place when the boss is ready," he snarled. "He's busy right now, being The Whisperer."

Dasher's eyes sparkled with a thought that pleased him greatly. He looked at his watch.

"The real Whisperer is gettin' his just about now," he rasped. "Then the boss is goin' to pull off the biggest jewel robbery in history."

Dasher rasped harsh laughter, beckoned his henchmen to follow him from the room. A steel panel slid back to let them out. Then it slid silently closed again.

CHAPTER VII.

DEATH BY FIRE.

Sophie walked quickly to the shabby mission run by Metro Estange. One dim light glowed in front of the Chariot of Fire. A yellow bulb in a miniature lighthouse, it was supposed to represent a beacon that burned ceaselessly,

guiding the derelict souls of the slums to a haven of rest.

Sophie opened the door that was never locked and stepped into the central meeting room. It was empty, now, of youthful, sneering gangsters. Only the drawn, lined faces of the spiritually tired showed in the room. Many of them slept or drowsed in the warmth of a small potbellied stove that burned to drive off the late-night chill.

Scrawny, hairless Metro Estange padded softly among his charges. He stopped now and then to whisper words of encouragement to those who had come to believe that their only hope lay in the Chariot of Fire.

When the skinny evangelist saw Sophie, he straightened, brought the tips of his skinny fingers together in a gesture of piety. He approached her softly.

"Ah, I am pleased that you have come before the need to obtain physical sustenance takes me elsewhere," he said in his curiously flat voice. "The markets open well before dawn on the water front, and I must get food for my hungry flock."

Metro ushered the girl to a vacant chair and seated her. Then he put on a battered hat and padded out into the darkness. Sophie fidgeted for a moment. An ancient crone in a chair beside her stirred, opened faded eyes. Sophie spoke hesitantly.

"The Whisperer," she breathed. "Has he been here tonight?"

The old crone grinned toothlessly and shook her head.

"He has not come," she said. "But he should come to Metro. The Whisperer and Metro are the only good ones in this life."

Sophie nodded and stared ahead of her. She knew that many a weak-willed soul who had stumbled into crime had been set straight by The Whisperer. She had heard that the only ones who needed to really fear the mystery man of the underworld were those still engaged in crime.

The blue eyes of the blond girl seemed to grow less hard. She seemed swept by some queer indecision. Then her lips tightened grimly. She started to rise, as if to leave, rather than wait for a chance meeting here with The Whisperer.

The groan of the door on its rusty hinges interrupted her and put a final decision in her mind. Her eyes brightened as she saw the black-clad, green-eyed figure come in the door. She breathed the name of The Whisperer softly. He turned; then he glided toward the now empty office of Metro Estange and beckoned the girl to follow.

Sophie rose, followed into the tiny, shabby office. The door, ajar, swung inward. As Sophie passed it, it swung suddenly shut. Rough, cruel hands seized the girl from behind! The black-dressed figure whirled; harsh, grating words rasped from his lips. The false Whisperer could disguise himself to look like the enemy of crime. But the eerie, ghostly challenge of the whispering voice eluded him.

Sophie gasped. She struggled mightily against the hands that held her, twisting to see who it was. The brutal face of a killer leered at her. This was not one of the youthful, sneering mob that had hung out in the Chariot of Fire. Most any policeman would have recognized him as a killer of long reputation, an escaped convict from an upstate prison.

Fear swept into Sophie's eyes. But there was also the desperation of an animal cornered; the mighty will of self-preservation that gives

strength to the weak in their last bid for freedom.

"You are a fraud," she shrilled. "The real Whisperer will soon be here. He will help me."

The false Whisperer laughed gratingly.

"I am the only Whisperer this city will ever know again," he rasped. "To prove that to you, my rash one, I shall permit you to witness his execution."

The man in black nodded to the brutal thug behind her.

"Bind her and bring her to the dungeon of the chariot," he snarled. He turned back to Sophie. "After you have seen the death of The Whisperer, we shall introduce you to our instruments of persuasion," he grated. "Then, perhaps you will tell us who you are and why you make phone calls to the daughter of a police executive."

Sophie shuddered. She had not seen the torture devices in the dungeon that held the chariot of fire. But the menace in the voice of her captor left little doubt of the extent to which he would go to obtain information.

The false Whisperer led the way as Dasher Kudno had done earlier. Terror grew in Sophie's eyes as she descended the narrow steps below the shack on the water front.

Her captor used an odd-looking tuning fork, as Dasher had done, to swing back the pivoted wall of dripping masonry. A hum of voices dropped away to a tomblike silence as the false Whisperer and his henchman brought the girl into the subterranean chamber. In the dim light, Sophie could see the sneering faces of many of the young gangsters she had encountered earlier.

There was one strange attitude expressed in their faces. The sneers of the young men suddenly seemed mere masks that covered a fear that they, themselves, held for the master criminal who controlled them. Instinctively, they backed away from the master crook.

Apparently, they feared something else, also. None of them stood near the huddled figure in black that was chained to the eyebolts in the masonry floor. The figure struggled faintly.

A gasp came from one of the young mobsters who stood about the room. Black eyes burned fiercely in the masklike face of Kid Sulphur. He started forward, was halted by words that spat from the lips of the leader like bullets of venom.

"Stay where you are, Sulphur," the crime master rapped. "This is your one chance to escape the chariot of fire, yourself."

Kid Sulphur snarled. But he halted, uncertainly. He trembled visibly as the other gunmen ranged menacingly around him. Whatever he might have had in mind, he must have known he would have no chance at all in thwarting the desires of the leader.

The crime czar sneered.

"After we have disposed of The Whisperer," he rasped, "you, Kid Sulphur, shall have the honor of torturing your girl friend here until she tells us who she is and why she tries to interfere with my plans."

The leader strode to the huddled form in chains and kicked it.

"Put him in the chariot!" he snapped. "Let's get this one over with!"

Eager mobsters leaped to obey that command. They unshackled chains from the eyebolts and lifted the now struggling form from the floor. Others pulled back the meshlike hood that formed the cover of

the chariot of fire. Then they waited till their master tested the apparatus.

The leader began to laugh with a glee touched with madness. He moved swiftly to a big black box against one wall. A panel opened, disclosing heavy-duty switches and dials. He knifed one switch closed and the scent of ozone burned into the chamber. Fat, blue sparks jumped from contacts. There was a loud hum in the air.

The heavy copper cables leading from the main insulators crackled with the heavy current that they carried. Blue flame leaped to one masonry wall where there was a leaky insulator. One main switch, that completed the circuit, was still open.

A dead silence filled the room. The young mobsters were obviously awe-struck by the horrid power of the chariot of fire. None moved except the four who had been assigned to put the bound form of The Whisperer into the death machine. The prisoner struggled, made the task a difficult one.

The leader nodded at the cruel escaped convict who had helped him kidnap Sophie. The killer grinned evilly and moved swiftly toward the struggling victim. A blackjack smashed against the black-clad prisoner's skull.

Swiftly, then, the four hoods completed their task. The figure was slumped, unconscious. The meshlike mask was pulled into place with precision. The master crook laughed raucously.

"A little touch at first," he sneered, "to jolt The Whisperer back to consciousness. I should like to have him conscious of his plight, before the main current burns him to a shapeless thing."

The tension in the air seemed as menacingly electric as the current that leaped through the giant copper cables.

The leader twisted a dial. The humming sound lessened, like some great monster not quite ready to deal out death. With a cackling laugh, he jammed home the switch. There was an instant smell of scorching flesh. The figure in the death machine writhed, strained forward. Muscles swelled, involuntarily trying to burst their bonds. The crime master opened the switch again. The figure in the chair began to struggle then. Consciousness had been shocked back into his brain.

The harsh laughter of the crime master filled the room. The man leaned forward, intently. He licked his lips, enjoying to the fullest the spectacle long desired by the powers of the underworld. The leader named it.

"Death to The Whisperer!"

With one hand he twisted the volume-control dial to the topmost limit. The hum of death droned into the room, a horrid pulse of death. Then he slammed home the switch.

Sparks crackled angrily. The body in the chair convulsed in mortal agony. There was only a gasp of fear and horror from the assembled killers.

A woman's scream split the air. Sophie had been forgotten by the mobsters in their concentration on the destruction of The Whisperer. The girl sobbed with horror, plunged across the room. Sophie saw what she believed to be her last chance of aid smoldering in the meshlike cage that was now white hot with heat. Sophie stumbled as she ran and fell straight toward the chariot of fire!

The crime master spat out an oath, ripped the death switch open.

"She must not die until I have questioned her," he shrieked.

His aids moved quickly, dragging the girl from scorching doom just as she fell against the white hot mesh. The sleeve of her woolen suit burst into flames, and they quickly beat them out.

Sophie moaned. She had been saved from death. But her nerves had reached the breaking point. Her head turned wildly as she stared at the body in the chariot of fire. The men involuntarily looked, too, toward the object of their destruction.

Then a yell of amazement welled up from the throats of the criminals. The crude gag that had obscured the mouth, eyes and nose of the victim had fallen down.

The half-burned face of Cokey, the gunman who had disappeared when they brought The Whisperer to the dungeon of death stared lifelessly at them!

The dead victim in the chariot of fire was not The Whisperer!

The crime master at the switch screamed in rage. He mouthed oaths and imprecations.

"Where's that Dasher? Dasher Kudno!" he screamed. "Dasher told me he had The Whisperer. Not this useless punk!"

The dead face of Cokey slumped forward, mocking the master of crime with sightless eyes.

Rage left the crime master then. The cold, merciless control that had enabled him to rule his mob with an iron hand showed itself. His voice dropped to flat, assured tones.

"Lash the girl to the rack," he snarled.

Then, as youthful mobbies leaped to obey, the master criminal nodded to the brutal ex-convict who had come in with him. The two retired to a vacant corner of the room.

"Ripper," the leader snarled in a low voice, "we'll pull the big job ahead of time. I don't know how much The Whisperer knows. But whatever it is, we'll use it against him."

"Huh?" Ripper grunted. "How'll we do that?"

The leader grinned evilly, pulled a late newspaper clipping from his pocket. It told of the murder of Isaac Dejeune.

VIOLENCE BRINGS CRIME WAVE INTO THE OPEN

Wave of Murder Expected After System of Thefts by Substitution

Ripper read the headlines. But they didn't seem to explain anything to him.

"That's what's goin' to happen, ain't it?" he grumbled.

The crime master's face was crafty.

"The young punks know what our next job is going to be," he explained. "This Whisperer is clever. He might hear them talking or worm the information out of them."

Ripper scratched his head and looked dumb. He waited for his boss to continue.

"You go out and talk about a big job in the offing," the crime master instructed. "Don't say what it is. But say that it's going to be done by murder. Spread that where it'll get to The Whisperer. The more guards the cops have around the tougher it'll be for The Whisperer to get inside to stop us. And it'll make the cops overconfident."

Ripper grinned. He realized that the boss was plenty clever.

"An' while they're standin' around, we'll get away with a cool million bucks!" he added.

Ripper was awed by the words he had muttered. The crime master interrupted the thoughts of his lieutenant. He looked quickly at his

watch, showed a sudden impatience.

"The boys ought to be back from the Tifton job, by now," he rasped. "I told them to shake any possible pursuit by starting for the Bronx and doubling back."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE WHISPERER RETURNS.

Outside of the innocent-appearing shack that concealed the entrance to the torture dungeon, under the narrow catwalk that led from the street to the edge of the dock, a dim figure stirred.

Blood oozed slightly from a wound just above one temple. A chuckling hiss drifted into the air and green eyes flickered open. The Whisperer was struggling back to consciousness!

The wraithlike foe of crime had knocked out the thug named Cokey in the melee he had started just before Dasher Kudno and the mob reached the hide-away. In the confusion of the scrap, The Whisperer had managed to slip off the crude gag that had been thrust into his mouth and clamp it over the face of the unconscious thug. He had then escaped, but had slipped and plunged a dozen feet from the slippery catwalk to a pile of jagged rocks below. The blow he received from striking those rocks had robbed him of consciousness.

Slowly, the dim figure struggled upward. Old rusty nails, protruding from rotting wood, gave him handholds to crawl back onto the catwalk. Fortunately, Cokey had been clad in dark attire. The Whisperer was still invisible.

Strength surged but slowly back into his limbs. He lay for a moment on the catwalk. Then he heard a faint scuffling of feet and low, cautious voices. The Whisperer did not know about the Tifton Co. jewel robbery. He only sensed that mobbies were converging on the hide-out he knew must be nearby.

The enemy of crime rolled to the dock, slid silently into the background of darkness. Eyes and ears alert, he lay a moment completely motionless. The scuffling of feet and the sound of voices grew closer.

"The boss must have got here a long time ago," one raucous voice suggested. "We went damn near to Yonkers before we doubled back."

"Yeah!" another muttered. "There ought to be a sweet payoff on this job. We got half a million in stuff at Tifton's."

Feet struck the narrow catwalk. The wood creaked with the weight of the mobbies. Apparently they considered themselves safe on home ground, now. They relaxed their careful vigilance. A few of them struck matches, lighted cigarettes.

The whispering chuckle that came then was scarcely audible. The faint sound seemed to have no direction. It was simply there for a moment. Then it was gone.

The leading thug stopped.

"What was that?"

"Aw, it's just the wind," another replied. "The boss has The Whisperer down below."

There were grumbling remarks of agreement to the thug's conclusion. But the mobbies were at once less sure of themselves. They ground cigarettes out under leather heels, moved more quietly. In the dark, they did not notice that their number had been increased by one!

The Whisperer did not need more light. The flickering of matches had told him some things that added to the picture of crime's plan that was formulating in his mind. He had noticed a scattering of youthful criminals in this mob. But most of

them were older, hardened gangsters with long records of violence and murder.

Crime's pattern was changing. That was the thought of The Whisperer as he padded along with the mob. The plan of death and robbery was varying, and The Whisperer thought he knew why that was so! The Whisperer did not, however, know of the recent conversation between the master criminal and his lieutenant, Ripper.

The mobsters reached the shack entrance to the dungeon. Their leader knew how to operate the hinged section of the floor. But at the foot of the steps, facing the dripping wall of masonry, he halted. He placed his fingers between his lips and whistled sharply, three times. There followed a slight rasping sound and a great, rusted bolt that seemed to hold the masonry together was removed from inside. The mobbie put his face in front of that so he could be seen.

Then the wall swung back on its pivot. The men surged into the room. The master criminal stood near the chariot of fire. He was still garbed as The Whisperer. Ripper stood beside him. The boss nudged Ripper, and the escaped convict slid out the aperture in the wall just before it closed behind the new arrivals.

"Were you followed?" the leader demanded of the thugs.

"Yeah!" one of them admitted. "But we shook off the cops before we doubled back."

"The jewels are being recut," the boss criminal told them. "Tomorrow we will split up the profits."

There was a rumble of assent to that plan. The men moved about, talking to each other about the wild times they were going to have with that ill-gotten cash. The Whisperer shrank into the background and moved with the thugs. The dim light in the chamber aided his deception.

As he moved about, the ghostlike nemesis of crime noticed a peculiar attitude among these crooks assembled before their chief. They instinctively divided into two groups. The older, hardened crooks displayed an open contempt for the younger mobbies. The youthful gangsters, some of whom The Whisperer had seen in the shabby mission of Metro Estange, seemed frightened, uncertain of their standing. An unconscious whisper of surprise escaped The Whisperer's lips.

It nearly spelled the end of his crime-fighting career. The thugs whirled at that sound and singled out the ghostlike figure.

"The Whisperer!" one yelled. "Get him!"

The eerie challenge of the crime foe welled up then, daring the crooks to take him. Guns leaped into gangster hands. Lead fanned the air! The roar of gunfire was deafening in the confines of the subterranean dungeon.

The Whisperer weaved, aided by the press of bodies; by the sheer numbers of the assault. Gang guns were halted by the fear of killing fellow mobsters. The Whisperer twisted his way through that mass of tangled bodies; his supersilenced pistols coughing blue flame and lead. Finally, he reached the master mind of the gang.

It seemed that there were two Whisperers, side by side. The two men struggled. The Whisperer reversed their positions. The gunmen hesitated. In the dim light they could not be certain which was friend and which was foe.

The Whisperer had the upper

hand for a moment. He held a gun jammed into the ribs of the kingpin of crime. But Ripper broke up the picture as it existed. Apparently, the escaped convict had a tuning fork key to open the masonry wall of the dungeon. The aperture swung open suddenly. Ripper dived into the room.

"Cops!" he shouted. "There's a hundred of 'em. The boys didn't shake 'em after all. The joint is surrounded."

The impact of those words broke the stalemate. Mobsters flung themselves toward The Whisperer and his black-clad counterpart. Both were bowled over in the mad rush. For behind the spot where the two stood lay the only avenue of escape!

The crime master was quick to take advantage of the change in the situation. His heavily shod foot kicked out and smashed The Whisperer in the skull. Then he scrambled to his feet and followed his mobbies down into a sewerlike hole that had opened in the floor. Before The Whisperer could leap to his feet and follow through the opening, a round disk of masonry slid back into the place and blocked it. There was not even a crack to show where it had been.

With a husky chuckle of sardonic mirth, The Whisperer moved across the room. The gang had forgotten one prisoner in their mad rush to escape.

Sophie was spread-eagled on a rack of torture. Her blue eyes were wide with the horror of everything that had gone on. The Whisperer did not untie her. He relaxed the bonds so that she was not uncomfortable.

"When the police come it will be better for you to be found tied," he whispered to the girl. "But first, you must have things to tell me. I will help you if you will tell me who you are and why you are involved in all this."

Sophie hesitated for a moment. Then she spoke.

"I . . . I was searching for you when they kidnaped me," she said. "I had followed Jeremiah Stoncut to the store of Morrie Manx, the midget. I believe he is behind all these thefts."

The Whisperer chuckled softly. He had ideas of his own about Jeremiah Stoncut.

"But who are you?" he hissed. "That, you must tell me."

The girl's eyes hardened. Then she seemed to realize that the police could find out in time, anyway.

"I am Gloria Walton," she told him. "Renlow Walton, the attorney, is my father!"

At that moment, the police arrived at the torture chamber. The nasal voice of Henry Bolton whined down the passageway from above. The Whisperer had no opportunity to further question the girl. He leaped quickly to the wall beside the opening and flattened himself against it.

"My stool pigeon swore that The Whisperer and another crook brought a kidnaped girl here," Bolton whined. "I'll promise immediate promotion for the man who gets The Whisperer."

The arrival of the cops was explained then to The Whisperer. Henry Bolton had a standing offer of immunity for underworld tipsters who would tell him where he could trap The Whisperer. Some stoolie on Henry's string had seen the disguised crime leader drag the girl into the vaultlike hide-out. And, ironically, the onslaught of the cops

came at a time when only the real Whisperer was in the place!

Blue-clad cops surged into the room with drawn guns. Bolton thrust ahead in their midst. The cops were halfway across the sprawling dungeon when one of them spied The Whisperer. He yelled the name of the mystery man who preyed on crime. Bolton whirled; he was in the midst of the mass charge.

In that instant, the lights went out, plunging the room into a tomblike darkness. There was a whispering chuckle of mirth as bodies crashed against bodies, as fist met jaw. The Whisperer had found the switch that controlled the lighting system. Confusion was complete in the blind struggle that ensued.

Finally, one cop found the light switch and flicked on the dim illumination. Three other burly men in blue were sitting on a captive.

"I'll send you all to Staten Island," the nasal voice of Bolton whined. "Get off me, you idiots. I'm not The Whisperer!"

The cops untangled themselves sheepishly. They were sure they would pay dearly for that error. But a sharp, staccato voice came to their aid from the passageway outside the dungeon.

"Who said you were The Whisperer, Henry?" Wildcat Gordon's brisk voice demanded. "Nobody's been able to catch The Whisperer as easily as they sat on you."

Slug Minor untangled himself from the mass of cops.

"Magniloquent understatement," he growled. "Henry ain't got sense enough to keep from capturing himself."

Deputy Bolton's Adam's apple moved up and down in annoyance. He gulped, looking somewhat like an unhappy fish. But the three cops who had been sitting on him looked relieved. They knew that the commissioner would thwart any pettish revenge that Bolton might contemplate.

RICHARD TRAEGER

• Retired Deputy Traeger, known as old Quick Trigger, is Wildcat Gordon's most trusted friend. He, alone, knows the secret of The Whisperer, for it was old Quick who aided Wildcat in devising the ghostlike figure of the underworld who is the foe of crime.

Henry strove to change the subject. He saw the girl lashed to the rack against one wall. He began to roar at her.

"What's your racket, sister?" he demanded. "Whose gun moll are you?"

Wildcat stepped quietly forward.

"I will take care of the girl, Henry," he said flatly. "You will take Slug and the rest of the boys back to headquarters. Wait there until you hear from me."

Wildcat untied the girl as the cops filed out of the dungeon. He looked sharply at her, a quizzical expression in his blue eyes.

"You look a lot like Renlow Walton," he snapped suddenly. "Could it be that you are related?"

Gloria Walton gasped. Her face flushed. A strange fear filled her eyes.

"Y-yes," she admitted. "I am his daughter."

Wildcat's expression did not change.

"Could it be that you suspect your father is behind all this?" he bored down. "Could it be that you are trying to cover up for him?"

The color drained from Gloria's face. Her words became wild, stammering protestations.

"No!" she gulped. "N-not that. I can't—"

Then Gloria Walton clamped her mouth shut. She refused to answer any other questions. She sank into a listless resistance that Wildcat could not break down.

"I don't know," she replied to every question that he asked her.

Wildcat Gordon fell silent then. He pieced together the several items that had been learned by himself and by The Whisperer. Certain suspicions were forming in his mind. They were suspicions that made him believe the plot of crime was far dirtier than he had originally suspected.

The wealthy denizens of Park Avenue could afford to lose the expensive baubles with which they adorned themselves. But there was something else that they could not afford to lose—something, in fact, that the City of New York could not afford to let happen. To ascertain whether those suspicions were correct, Wildcat Gordon must have more information than this blond girl was willing to give him.

Wildcat made a quick decision. He had every reason to believe that Tiny Traeger would have returned to her home by this time. Naturally, he had no way of knowing that Quick and Tiny had been kidnaped by Dasher Kudno and his mobsters. So Wildcat took Gloria to the penthouse apartment. He whisked her out of the torture dungeon and across the ancient dock. A block away, he flagged down a taxi. No words were spoken on the crosstown trip in the cab. Wildcat's plan was to confront Gloria Walton with Tiny Traeger, then enlist Tiny's aid in extracting from her the secret of fear that was driving her on a path parallel to crime.

Wildcat emitted a whistle of astonishment as he climbed from the cab in front of the old warehouse on top of which Quick had built his apartment. The elevator was at the street level. Both the outer door and the door of the cage, itself, were open.

The police commissioner shoved the girl ahead of him. He slammed the controls of the elevator, shot the contrivance skyward. His eyes were hard and slitted as he stepped out on the penthouse floor and viewed the evidence of the fight that had been staged there.

There could be but one conclusion in Wildcat's mind: Tiny and Quick Trigger had been kidnaped by the master criminal.

"Tiny Traeger's life is in danger because of you," Wildcat snapped. "Now, tell me all of the answers to

this thing. Why are you involved in it?"

Gloria Walton's face worked strangely. There was a mute appeal in her blue eyes. Her lower lip trembled in indecision. But then that fear that Wildcat had seen before took possession of her. She shook her blond head.

"I c-cant tell you," she said. "I w-won't tell you any more. It wouldn't help."

Wildcat growled savagely. He had no time to lose; none to waste dragging information from her unwilling lips. He seized her roughly, tied her securely to a heavy chair.

"You will be here when I want you," he rapped. "And when I learn it, your story had better be a good one."

Wildcat strode out of the room. He paused momentarily at a small, locked cabinet near the elevator. Black garments came from the cabinet. Making a bundle under his arm, the police commissioner stepped into the elevator and slid closed the door.

It was not Wildcat who emerged on the dark street below. The green eyes of The Whisperer glinted above the oddly pointed chin. The long arm of justice was taking up the trail to rescue Quick Trigger and Tiny.

And in doing that, he knew he would have to be taken along that trail by the kidnapers, themselves—that he, himself, must be kidnaped!

CHAPTER IX.

THE MAHARAJA'S JEWELS.

The Whisperer was certain that his only path lay at the source of the crimes. There was no clue on which he could base a trail directly to the kidnapers of his friends. He must take a trail instead that would bring him close to the master of crime, himself.

The Whisperer went back to the dingy hangouts of the Bowery to search for paths that would lead him to the kingpin of crime. He did not go to Metro's Chariot of Fire this time. It had occurred to The Whisperer that the master criminal's use of a death machine of that name might be a scheme to throw suspicion on the skinny evangelist.

The Whisperer's mouth was grim as he strode up the Bowery. He made straight for the foul gambling dive known as the Den of Aces; the sinkhole of crime that was protected by greedy politicians.

His clothing looked ill-fitting and shabby as he mounted the steps into the gambling joint. There was a beaten, furtive attitude about him. The pointed chin was buried deep in the collar of his coat. The green eyes were hidden by half-closed lids. The invisible-tape sutures were removed from the corners of his eyes.

There was no half-Oriental menace in the face of The Whisperer. Cheap gangsters were not apt to recognize him as the nemesis so feared by the leaders of the underworld. Rather, a petty figure in crime known as Dunk Smith.

The Whisperer slipped into the Den of Aces unobserved. He had a trick of blending with a crowd, of moving with it so that he attracted little notice. But the green eyes scrutinized everything in that den of vice without missing a single detail.

Some of the youthful hoods he had previously encountered were in the room. There were also other weak-faced youngsters lounging about the place. Some of them played bird cage or roulette. A dice game clicked off winnings for the house in another corner.

The Whisperer did not know who really owned the Den of Aces. The owner kept himself hidden, letting minor racketeers run it for him. He knew that they ran it honestly—for the owner—because grim and sudden death awaited them if they did not.

The Whisperer watched the youths who were engaged in the play. Some of them had faces that he recognized. Many could afford their losses, or, at least, had fathers who could well afford to pay. There were others who could not; who watched with worried faces the numbers turned up by the crooked wheels.

The Whisperer knew there was not an honest wheel in the place. Every wheel was wired, every set of dice loaded and thrown by an expert hand. The foe of crime suppressed a whispering chuckle that might have given him away.

Unobtrusively, he moved about the room, watching and listening. Then he heard one conversation that pointed the direction that crime was going to take. He heard a strange name to be mentioned in a foul dive such as this. It was that of the Maharaja of Kohore.

"Cripes, you ought to see them jewels!" one young thug exploded. "There's two million bucks' worth if there's a dime."

The Whisperer's eyes narrowed even more. The youthful hood had understated the value of the jewels of the Maharaja of Kohore. The crime foe knew that; he knew what the appraisal on those jewels had been.

Two and a half million dollars had been the figure set by a selected board of experts. That was the sum the maharaja actually expected to realize on them after their public display in the Stuyvesant Galleries had been terminated.

For the Maharaja of Kohore had fled an expected uprising in his section of India. The Maharaja had escaped with his jewels and had come to New York to market them. The public show at the Stuyvesant Galleries was for the purpose of advertising their intended sale.

The young thug who had spoken of the grandiose plan to steal those jewels gloated. He mentioned several things he was going to do with his split on the profits.

"We grab that layout," he explained. "Then we go back to Park Avenue for another clean-up. Boy, it'll shake the city!"

Another voice cut into the conversation. The twisted face of Ripper, the escaped convict, sneered defiance of the police.

"Yeah! We go in with Tommy-guns. There ain't enough cops there to stop us for a minute. We just cut them down like wooden soldiers. Then we're on the lam."

A shadowy figure on the other side of the room moved as Ripper spoke. The Whisperer recognized that one as a stool pigeon who often sold information to the police. Sometime he would be killed for that practice. But he was a man who needed drugs to keep alive. And without cash he couldn't buy the cocaine and heroin for which he lived.

The Whisperer moved quietly into the background. He hissed a half-audible whisper of decision. He knew the gloating boast of Ripper would soon be in the hands of the department; knew that the police guard would then be instantly trebled.

He also saw that Ripper's quick eye had noticed the movement of the stoolie. The Whisperer divined that the lieutenant of the master of crime had deliberately sown the

story of violent attack on the Stuyvesant Galleries.

The ruse had failed as far as The Whisperer was concerned. And in addition to that, the black-clad foe of crime knew one other fact about those gems. As a precaution, the authorities had them inspected twice a day by an expert whose practiced eye could tell at a glance if any substitution had been practiced on the collection.

That expert was Jeremiah Stoncut, the skinny jeweler who had handled the gems of Maria Corello and Renlow Walton before they had been switched for synthetics!

The Whisperer stepped quickly out into the darkness. Swiftly, he straightened his black clothing, drew his shoulders erect. The pointed chin was again visible above the collar of his black coat. The green eyes gleamed balefully. There was nothing furtive nor shabby, now, about The Whisperer. He was again the long arm of justice who fought crime to its destruction.

The half-visible battler stepped quickly around a corner. He had left his black coupé parked there. Quietly, he got in and gunned the motor. The coupé shot up the Bowery, cut over toward the lower end of Park Avenue. The combination office and apartment of Jeremiah Stoncut was his destination. The time had come for a showdown with the skinny jewel expert.

The coupé ground to a halt outside of Stoncut's little building. It was a tiny, two-story edifice, wedged in between two skyscraper apartments. The first floor was Stoncut's office. The second floor consisted of his living quarters.

Stoncut's elderly housekeeper came to the door. Her eyes were poor, and she could not distinguish the outline of The Whisperer. The visitor said he was from the police, which was truer than anyone who might have overheard would have realized.

The housekeeper talked freely enough. There was worry in her voice. She said that her employer had not been home at all that evening or night. It was unlike him to stay away until such uncivilized hours of the morning, she added.

The Whisperer thanked her, left the building with a soft whisper of bewilderment on his lips. It looked as though Stoncut had left hurriedly, fearing that developments were catching up with him too rapidly.

But, if the theft of the fabulous jewels of the Maharaja of Kohore was really on the fire, and if Jeremiah Stoncut was actually the brain behind the plot, it did not seem logical that he would have fled so soon.

Unless—a sudden thought sent The Whisperer's breath hissing between his teeth—unless the theft had already been accomplished by substitution!

That was a question he would have to answer soon. But first, he wanted to pay another visit to Morrie Manx, the midget. He wanted the reaction of Morrie Manx to a question of whether Jeremiah Stoncut had been there that night.

The Whisperer leaped into his coupé and roared down Park Avenue and cut over to the East Side, well above the speed limits allowed by the law. He jammed on his brakes outside of Morrie Manx's establishment.

Morrie had been staying open almost all night these past few weeks. Police had watched the wholesale clearing house. But they had been unable to catch any thieves actually

trading in stolen gems. Right now, Morrie seemed to be about to shut up shop and retire to the tangled cot in the rear that he called a bed.

The midget whirled as The Whisperer glided into the store. His little face blanched at the intensity of the green eyes that burned into his brain. Steely hands reached out and seized the tiny jewel fence.

"Has Jeremiah Stoncut been here tonight?" The Whisperer demanded.

Morrie gulped.

"Y-yes," he stammered. "Stoncut was here. He looked at some jewels and went away again."

The Whisperer's lips were grim.

"You are not going to talk of my visit," he hissed.

The Whisperer forced Morrie Manx to open his large wall safe. The combination numbers clicked into his brain as he watched the midget's nimble fingers operate the dial. The Whisperer tied the little man and thrust him inside the safe.

Before he went back into the main room, he swiftly inspected the jewels in the strong box. Then he went rapidly through the drawers and showcases outside. Aside from the one box of jewels that The Whisperer had examined earlier, he found nothing of any particular value in the place!

With a chuckling laugh, the enemy of crime padded out of the building, carefully locking the door behind him. That crime was on the march, he was certain. That he would be able to thwart it, he was no so sure.

CHAPTER X.

METRO IS WILLING.

Henry Bolton and Slug Minor had not been back at headquarters long when Henry's vanity reasserted itself. Certain conclusions of some of the taxpaying citizens had been bothering Henry of late. And, right now, he felt capable of combatting a tendency that he had considered dangerous.

Some persons who had the ability to add more than two and two to reach an answer, had begun to wonder if The Whisperer was not really a force for justice.

Henry, of course, knew that such a belief was a fallacy. Now, he was certain, he had the proof.

"The Whisperer's the main guy behind these crimes," he told Slug Minor loftily. "And the sooner Wildcat wakes up to that fact, the better off we'll be."

Slug Minor grunted. He didn't care one way or another about The Whisperer. In fact, Slug had found a certain admiration for the swift apprehension he knew The Whisperer had meted out to some criminals Bolton hadn't been able to catch.

But, above all, Slug Minor was loyal to Wildcat Gordon. Years before, when Slug had been a truck driver on the water front, crooks had staged a spectacular robbery in such a fashion that Slug had been framed perfectly. If it had not been for the unceasing efforts of Wildcat Gordon—then a detective—Slug would have gone to Sing Sing. Instead, he had found employment as Wildcat's personal chauffeur.

"Aw, Wildcat knows what he's doin'," Slug muttered. "He hasn't been captured by his own cops, yet."

"No," Henry snapped. "And neither has The Whisperer."

Slug clenched his fists. It seemed for a moment that he was going to practice physical violence on Henry. Then he controlled himself.

"Aw, how do y'u know what's goin' on?" he grumbled. "Y'u ain't no haruspex."

Bolton gulped and reached for a dictionary. It was his only defense against Slug. Then he snapped it shut.

"I may not be any oracle," he whined, "but at least I can see that we have to get The Whisperer and stop this crime wave."

Henry suddenly received aid from an unexpected source. There were certain stool pigeons he had found valuable to him. He had left word that they should be brought to him personally whenever they had information. A desk sergeant rapped on the door and ushered in the wispy stoolie who had slid out of the Den of Aces after hearing Ripper's boast.

He darted a furtive glance at Slug Minor, then blurted out what he had overheard. Henry's fishlike mouth made a round O, as if he were going to start blowing bubbles.

"See!" he yelped. "The Whisperer's going to tackle the biggest job he ever tried. The jewels of Kohore!"

Henry was positively awestruck. He dismissed the stoolie, promised him a sizable slice of cash if his word proved to be more than a pipe dream. Then Henry picked up the phone and began to issue orders. In the absence of Wildcat, Henry was in charge.

But Wildcat strode into the room while Bolton was on the phone. Henry ordered the twenty-four-hour guard in the Stuyvesant Galleries immediately trebled. Then, his small eyes glowing in anticipation, he said:

"No one must know that the guard has been increased. The Whisperer will walk right into a trap."

Wildcat's sharp voice behind Henry made him gasp.

"On the contrary, Henry," he snapped. "Call the newspapers and tell them that the guard has been trebled. Tell them we expect an attempt at robbery to be made!"

Bolton stammered objections. He could see the capture of The Whisperer slipping between his fingers.

"B-b-but, we'll just scare him away," Henry blurted. "Th-this way we have a chance to catch him."

"I am still in charge, Henry," Wildcat reminded him. "We will publicly increase the guard."

Bolton mumbled something about seeing the mayor. Wildcat cut him off.

"Right now, we will go to the Stuyvesant Galleries and inspect those gems," he rapped. "There is a possibility that the robbery attempt will be made by a clever substitution."

Henry Bolton grumbled under his breath on the ride from Centre Street. It did not make sense to him that The Whisperer should be warned of the precautions taken to thwart his plans.

But Wildcat Gordon had a threefold reason for the course he was taking. If the robbery were attempted, even if it should prove successful, it would certainly be done by stealth rather than violence. The lives of honest policemen were always of first concern to Wildcat Gordon.

Secondly, if the master crook were certain that the false bait left by Ripper in the Den of Aces had been swallowed by the police, he might be more careless in his real attempt to gain possession of the Kohore gems.

Wildcat's last reason was by no means the least important in his mind. As long as the master crook's plans were going smoothly, as long as his time and efforts were being taken up in carrying out his plan of crime, he might be too well

occupied to attend to the destruction of Quick Trigger and Tiny.

Wildcat was not only moving to unmask a crook and untangle a snarl of vicious crime; he was also stalling for time in which to save the lives of those two persons he loved.

Wildcat made no comment on that ride to the midtown area. But both of his aids could sense a growing tension in the brisk police commissioner. It communicated itself to them. Even Henry Bolton ceased his grumbling and complaining.

Slug swung the car in to the curb before the Stuyvesant Galleries, and all three climbed out. The uniformed cop at the door admitted them. There were half a dozen armed cops in the huge room that contained the jewel display of the Maharaja of Kohore. Each case was illuminated by a special light.

Wildcat Gordon pulled a jeweler's kit from his pocket. Quickly, he screwed the powerful glass to one eye. Wildcat had been learning much about stones during these series of gem thefts. The commissioner worked rapidly, now. Wildcat was not an expert. But he could tell that there were no heat-treated zircons substituted for diamonds, no cheap doublets to fool the eye into thinking they were rubies. The emeralds were without structure lines or gas bubbles frequently found in synthetics.

Wildcat did a thorough job. He examined every stone in the collection. Finally, he seemed satisfied and stood erect. He folded up his kit, then placed it in a brief case he carried.

"The master criminal has not yet tried substitution for his theft," he announced flatly. "Those were all real gems."

The door of the big room opened then. A squad of uniformed cops came in. Plain-clothes detectives were behind them. The trebled guard had arrived. Wildcat smiled grimly.

"I think we are ready for the master mind," he snapped. "But nothing must be said about my inspection of the jewels or about my suspicions that substitution may be tried."

Wildcat took Henry and Slug out with him. He sent Bolton back to headquarters. Then he turned to Slug.

"You go to Metro's Chariot of Fire," he instructed. "Wake Metro up, if he is in bed. But get him."

Slug rubbed his huge hands together.

"It'll be a pleasure," he rumbled.

Wildcat shook his head.

"You have the wrong idea," he said. "I merely want you to get from Metro a complete list of his recent *young* converts."

Slug grunted and hailed a cab. This didn't make much sense to him. But Slug was not one to question the orders of his chief. The taxi rumbled down toward the Bowery, negotiated the turn under the elevated structure and came to a halt in front of Metro's Chariot of Fire.

The beacon in the miniature lighthouse burned bleakly. Slug grunted and strode in through the front door. The derelicts snored in wooden armchairs about the main room. A light burned in Metro's shabby office.

The scrawny soul saver popped out of the office, licking his thin bluish lips in surprise. He bowed unctuously, instinctively bringing his skinny fingertips together as if he were about to begin a prayer.

"Ah, you are of the police, I believe," he said in his curiously flat voice.

Slug grunted that he was. A fleeting expression of pain seemed to

Slug grunted as he watched the derelicts sleeping about the room. Metro Estange popped out of his office, bowing unctuously.

cross Metro's thin cheeks. His head turned on his stringy neck as he surveyed the ancient hulks that had once been capable men and women. One hand passed over his nearly hairless skull.

"None of my flock have been in difficulties, I trust," he said without inflection. Slug couldn't tell whether it was a question or a statement. He shook his head.

"I don't want none of 'em," he countered. "What I do want is a complete list of your recent *young* converts."

Slug emphasized the word, "young," as had Wildcat. He watched Metro closely as he made his demand known. Slug didn't have much use for the operator of the mission. He had been disappointed when Wildcat had not wanted Metro brought into headquarters.

Metro pursed his lips as if in thought. Again he brought his fingertips together. Then he turned and padded softly toward his office.

"You shall certainly have what you desire," he said. "Pray come with me."

Slug lumbered after him. His eyes narrowed slightly. He hadn't expected co-operation like this from Metro. It just didn't fit into the picture he had conceived. Slug had been sure Metro was outside of the law, somehow. But then, he reminded himself, he had been wrong before.

Metro seated himself behind his big roll-top desk. He smiled benignly at Slug and thumbed through a ledger. From it he took a list of names, written in crabbed longhand. He handed it to Slug.

The giant took the list. Then his brows contracted into a frown of bewilderment. He scarcely heard the flat voice of the skinny evangelist go on in odd, sepulchral tones.

"I am quite proud of them," Metro said. "It is gratifying to discover that the impulse to reform is found among those who can afford the evil ways of flesh."

Metro tapped his fingers together.

"They pay no more than any others for the meager sustenance offered here," he observed. "Salvation is not something that can be evaluated like tawdry merchandise."

Slug grunted in amazement. He had something to add to his surprise at Metro's willingness to co-operate. The list of young converts he held contained the names of a dozen or more sons of some of the wealthiest and most socially prominent families on Park Avenue!

Slug was about to blurt out a score of suspicions that flashed into his mind. But a warning bell gonged in his brain. This was one time, he felt, that he hadn't better try to think. It was way beyond him.

But one name raced through his mind; the only person who had cropped up in this thing so far who would be in a position to contact youngsters of the wealth and background of these families. Slug was not thinking of Jeremiah Stoncut, but of Attorney Renlow Walton, who had been the financial as well as social equal of any name on the list —before bad investments reversed his fortunes!

Slug grumbled to himself and settled back to wait for the phone call Wildcat Gordon had told him to expect.

CHAPTER XI.

THE WHISPERER CAPTURED!

The Whisperer returned to the Bowery. The trail that might lead him to Quick Trigger and Tiny still centered there; for he still had to

come to grips with the master criminal or his henchmen before he could pick up that trail.

He was grimly determined to do that; to use himself as bait. A gloating assurance that The Whisperer was within crime's grip had more than once brought the enemy of the underworld within reach of solution of problems in the past.

The Whisperer chuckled softly as he halted his black coupé outside of Morrie Manx's jewel clearing house. The place looked deserted; it seemed not to have been entered since The Whisperer had left.

But he could not be certain from the appearance. Softly, he clicked the purloined key in the latch and glided into the main showroom. He had left a dim night light burning. Deft fingers twisted the dial on the big safe.

Morrie Manx was still bound and gagged inside. The midget squirmed, glaring at The Whisperer in open hate. The black-clad battler chuckled hoarsely. He left the door of the safe open for a moment to permit fresh air to fill the big vault. He had no desire that Morrie Manx suffocate in his temporary prison.

Then he closed and locked the safe and moved to a phone booth in one corner of the room. He removed the queer dental plates and dialed a number. Slug Minor answered the phone in the shabby office of Metro Estange. The Whisperer asked him in the voice of Wildcat Gordon if he had obtained the wanted list.

Slug's voice growled with excitement as he told Wildcat what he had found. He read the names on the list over the phone. His tone indicated that he expected his chief to be surprised. Slug's beetle brow furrowed at the answer he got.

"That is exactly what I suspected," Wildcat snapped. "Return to headquarters and take the list with you."

Slug grunted in surprise but said he would leave immediately.

The Whisperer opened the door of the phone booth, started to slide out of it. As he did, there was a sudden rush of bodies toward the booth.

The mobsters swooped down upon The Whisperer!

The lone battler would have been in a better position to fight if he had not been phoning in the voice of Wildcat Gordon. The dental plates that created both the pointed chin and the voice of The Whisperer were still in one hand.

He could not afford to let these crooks see his face without those plates in place. It was necessary for him to turn his back, to flee for a few seconds, with the gunmen in close pursuit. A roar welled up from the mobbies. They mistook that sudden retreat as an indication that The Whisperer feared to face the attack.

Guns roared and lead plowed through the clothing of The Whisperer. He staggered as the slugs smashed against his bulletproof undergarment. One voice rapped orders. The Whisperer recognized the voice. It was that of Dasher Kudno, the gang lieutenant who, The Whisperer surmised, had most likely superintended the kidnaping of Quick Trigger and Tiny!

At last, he had come to grips with the criminals who might lead him to the path he sought—if they did not first get The Whisperer!

The gunmen bellowed oaths of hatred as they plunged across the room toward their enemy. Suddenly, they brought up short. The Whisperer whirled around, supersilenced pistols in his hands. Their

hissing message of death wrote a quick finis to the misguided careers of some of those men. They stumbled, coughing their last breaths—

But two things happened, then, to end that battle. A stealthy henchman of Dasher Kudno slipped around behind The Whisperer.

A blackjack smashed against the skull of the lone battler in black. He stumbled and fell to the floor. He writhed once, then was still. The Whisperer was not unconscious. But he was quickly made a prisoner!

Dasher snarled his intentions for their mysterious foe.

"I'd like to add this bird to those other prisoners we've got," he snarled. "We could burn him with the old cop and the dame."

Stout ropes went about his wrists and ankles. But The Whisperer was content. Dasher Kudno had made it known that Quick Trigger and Tiny were still alive. He had also indicated his intention of taking The Whisperer to them. But even as the last bonds were made fast, The Whisperer's hopes of that happening soon were dashed.

The Whisperer had noticed that none of the youngsters who had first been in evidence in the plans of the crime master were among these hardened thugs. Ripper was one of this mob.

"We can't take him upstate," he reminded Dasher Kudno. "The boss wants us in town for a while."

Dasher grunted in agreement. Then he prowled around Morrie Manx's gem house. Ripper was near him, apparently searching for something.

"Where the hell's that midget?" Dasher snarled. "He ain't supposed to leave the joint."

Ripper grunted.

"Don't matter," he rasped. "We got what we want. Let's go."

The Whisperer had gathered from their conversation that Quick and Tiny were held somewhere out of the city. He had hoped that Kudno would take him there.

But the gunmen had other plans. A black sedan was parked outside of the jewel clearing house. Dasher carefully locked the door after The Whisperer had been carried into the sedan. Then he got behind the wheel and drove up the Bowery.

He braked the car to a halt outside of the Den of Aces, the dive where The Whisperer had first heard of the intended theft of the jewel collection of the Maharaja of Kohore.

The mobbies sneered in triumph as they dragged The Whisperer through the gambling room. The youths and other criminals, ranging around the room, stared with awe when they learned the identity of the prisoner.

Crime had scored a triumph in the capture of The Whisperer. The gunmen gloated about that as they shoved the bound figure into a small anteroom, behind the counting office in the rear of the gambling hall.

Dasher Kudno swaggered out into the main room, smirking in the pride of his accomplishment. Ripper remained behind for a moment with The Whisperer. Hatred burned in the bleak eyes of the hardened gangster, and his mouth began to work nervously. He kicked the recumbent form of the prisoner. Then he stiffened and pulled a long-bladed knife from a belt sheath. Ripper had gotten his nickname from his dexterous use of that knife. Slowly, he bent over The Whisperer!

"I'll take a chance on an O. K. from the boss," he snarled. "I'll finish you off right away!"

Ripper raised the knife, hesitated only a fraction of a second. Then he plunged the flashing blade straight for the heart of The Whisperer!

The wraithlike mystery foe chuckled weirdly and shifted his position on the floor, so that his breast was directly below that swishing knife. Ripper did not realize it, but he was playing directly into The Whisperer's hands!

Two things happened with dazzling swiftness. The knife blade clashed against the fine mesh of the bulletproof vest The Whisperer was wearing. His bound feet shot out, tripping Ripper! The killer was already off balance, leaning over as he was. The hard-heeled blow against his shins sent him sprawling.

As Ripper fell, The Whisperer brought his knees up sharply. They smashed against the jaw of the killer! There was a crunch of bone. A groan uttered from the escaped convict. Then he was unconscious on the floor.

With a soft chuckle, The Whisperer rolled. Slim hands found the knife that had slipped from the unconscious fingers of his foe. Quickly, they turned the blade and slashed at the bonds that held his wrists. In another instant, The Whisperer was free—free in the center of crime's web!

CHAPTER XII.
CRIME'S PEONAGE.

The Whisperer moved swiftly then. He bent over the unconscious killer, ripped clothing from his body.

The Whisperer traded clothes with Ripper and padded silently to a cracked mirror that hung on one wall. He withdrew a small make-up kit from his inside jacket. Grease-pencil lines on his face, small bits of cotton batting in the nostrils changed the appearance of his face.

The long chin was buried in the collar of the flashy coat Ripper had worn. A shapeless cap was pulled well down over the green, slanted eyes. The disguise was not perfect, but it might work in the smoke-filled gambling hall.

With a soft whisper of defiance, The Whisperer moved out of the little anteroom. Ripper, behind him, was firmly bound and gagged.

The Whisperer paused in the counting office on his way to the gambling room. No one was there. Against one wall, there was a scarred flat-topped desk. A dog-eared ledger lay on the green blotter. The Whisperer opened it, saw a long list of names with figures entered after them.

The list coincided exactly with the roster of new converts who had joined Metro Estange's shoddy mission half a block up the street!

The Whisperer chuckled softly as he read the names and the figures. The amounts were large. Whether they represented winnings or losses at the games of chance, there was no indication.

The Whisperer did not immediately realize the true significance of those figures. He pondered that as he slid unobtrusively out into the main gambling room. A quick glance informed him that most of the youths whose names were on that list loitered in the shoddy den of vice at that moment.

Chuck-a-luck, bird cage, roulette and dice games were in full progress. Most of the youths were either intent upon their own playing or were watching the play of others. They paid scant attention to the figure dressed in the clothing of Ripper. For the moment, at least, the disguise of The Whisperer was satisfactory.

He singled out one youth who stood dejectedly apart from the rest. The son of a retired motor magnate, the young man was slack-jawed and vacant-eyed as he stared at the players through the smoke.

The Whisperer sidled up to him. He adopted the rasping tones of Ripper.

"Hear you won fourteen hundred dollars last night," he grated. "How'd you do that in this joint?"

The young man started. His mouth snapped shut. Then he shrugged.

"That's the amount the house advanced me," he whined. "I didn't win anything."

He brightened slightly.

"I can borrow more from the house," he said. "Maybe I can win back the whole thing. It's my only chance. The boss lets us all try to get even on his money."

The slack-jawed youth slunk uncertainly toward an eye-shaded croupier who sat at the main roulette wheel. He was the lieutenant in charge of the Den of Aces. The croupier nodded immediately when the motor magnate's son addressed him. With no comment at all, he pulled a huge roll of bills from his pocket and shelled out several bills of large denominations.

The Whisperer's green eyes narrowed. There was something here that was extremely vicious. He knew that the wired wheels in this place offered the youths no chance at all to win.

He knew that some of these young men had resources they could tap

to repay the continued loans that the Den of Aces advanced to them. But he also knew that at least half of the socially prominent youths in the room did not have access to funds in sufficiently large amounts to repay the master criminal who controlled this den of vice.

Then The Whisperer suddenly saw crime's plan. He saw a system of peonage to robbery that had made the whole series of gem thefts a possibility!

He recalled the rotten loan-shark racket the police uncovered in Brooklyn last fall; a system in which housewives were encouraged to gamble and borrow money at extortionate rates to try to recoup. Those women had been afraid to let their husbands know they had used the grocery money of the family budget for gambling.

Little by little, they had been drawn into a mesh of debt. And little by little, their fear of exposure led them into crime as the only means of keeping public scandal from engulfing them!

A system of peonage to crime had been used by wily criminals to force women to act as spotters for the valuables of their own friends. Burglaries were conducted during card parties, in which women guests unlocked windows, pointed out to outside crooks where valuables were kept!

That much is on the record in the police files of Brooklyn. Now, The Whisperer saw the same Faginlike plan in operation in the homes of the genuinely wealthy, where the take would run into fortunes. And not only that, but the youth of that area was being ruined; was being forced step by step into a life of crime from which only extermination of the system and of those crooked debts could save them!

That task, The Whisperer must perform!

The Whisperer was wrapped in concentration as he drifted across the room. He tried to discern the focal point from which the modern Fagin started his onslaught on the homes of the wealthy. There must have been, within his grasp, intimate knowledge of what youths to pick; which ones would be most susceptible to the lure of gambling.

He had to know which youths would be possessed of information that would be valuable to them. The master criminal must have had a complete knowledge of the workings of New York's most social and wealthy set!

Two names flashed before The Whisperer. Jeremiah Stoncut was one of them. The other was the same name that had occurred to Slug Minor: Renlow Walton. Could that explain the peculiar actions of blond Gloria Walton? Somehow, Renlow Walton was involved in this thing. The Whisperer recalled the strange lack of desire to prosecute Stoncut that had come over the lawyer. And Walton had previously been known as a tenacious, investigating attorney who never quit a fight.

But that was before Walton had lost a large part of his fortune in bad investments.

The Whisperer did not know the answers to those problems, yet. And there was something in the set-up that did not seem quite in line with other conclusions that he had reached.

So completely absorbed in his thoughts was The Whisperer that he did not notice Dasher Kudno slipping into the counting office. He did see Dasher emerge, pale rage in his face.

Dasher whipped out black automatics and began to blast at The Whisperer. The enemy of crime brought his two supersilenced guns into action. He weaved and dodged the bullets that slammed across the room, searching for mortal marks on his body. The battle started out to be a duel between Dasher and The Whisperer.

Kudno dived behind a large wooden post that acted as support for the roof of the Den of Aces. He poked the muzzles of his guns around it. Dasher Kudno knew the marksmanship of The Whisperer.

Then hardened thugs of Dasher's gang began to converge upon him. They blocked the front entrance of the dive. The Whisperer maneuvered around the room. He backed toward the only door that might conceivably offer a path to escape. There was a tiny window in the anteroom behind the counting office.

Whispering in defiance, the lone battler backed through that doorway. A heavy body hurtled at him from inside the counting office. Dasher had untied the bonds that held Ripper.

The impact of Ripper's rush sent The Whisperer tumbling to his knees. Dasher Kudno leaped upon him then. He reversed his guns and smashed the heavy butts against the skull of his foe. The Whisperer slumped, his senses reeling.

Ripper had retrieved his knife from the floor of the anteroom. He whipped it out and started again to thrust it into the body of The Whisperer. Dasher Kudno shook his head.

"You disobeyed the boss' orders once, and The Whisperer almost got away from us," he rapped. "I just got a message from the boss. He says to take The Whisperer to Westchester right away. He—"

Dasher looked around at the young thugs and gamblers who were grouped around the form of The Whisperer and shut up abruptly. Whatever was crime's plan, now, it was evident that the youths in its mesh were not to be taken into the confidence of the master crook.

"The hearse is here," Dasher rasped. "You and I will take The Whisperer, Ripper. The rest of the mob stays here."

Steel manacles were placed around the wrists of the crime fighter this time. Other manacles encircled his ankles. Dasher had heard that the wraithlike battler could squeeze out of ropes with the agility of Houdini. For the long trip to the Westchester hide-out, he was taking no unnecessary chances.

Ripper and Kudno carried The Whisperer out into the dim street. The first gray light of dawn was beginning to filter through the dust of the city air. The two gunmen hurried at their task, lest some passerby notice the plight of The Whisperer. Their conversation was held in low, muted tones.

"What's on the fire?" Ripper demanded.

It seemed that Ripper, as well as Dasher Kudno, was high enough in the organization of crime's master to be trusted. They withheld nothing from The Whisperer's ears; he was to die anyway.

"The boss is all set for the big push," Dasher mumbled. "He grabs the Kohore jewels today. Then he burns down the Westchester joint to give him an excuse to go away from the city. His business ain't so good and he's sick of it. So he retires. See?"

Ripper grunted.

"Yeah! And then we help him spend the dough."

Dasher Kudno closed and locked the door of the hearse. He laughed gratingly.

"The best part of it is that the young punks will be left holdin' the bag for the whole business. The newspapers'll make so much fuss about that that we'll be forgotten about. An' none of 'em knows who the boss is."

The two gangsters laughed in brutal mirth as Dasher meshed the gears of the hearse and sent it rumbling across town toward the Express Highway that leads to Westchester County.

CHAPTER XIII.

REVEALED BY DEATH!

In Wildcat Gordon's office on Centre Street, Henry Bolton sat with his feet on the desk of the police commissioner. Slug Minor prowled around the room, clenching and unclenching his huge fists. Slug was impatient, wanted to get into action.

Bolton whined nasally, as he stared at the list of Metro Estange's converts unhappily. There were names on that list that were far too socially and politically prominent to suit Henry.

"I think this list is a plant," he protested. "These names couldn't be linked to this kind of crime."

Slug Minor grunted.

"Afraid to step on toes that have big feet attached to 'em, eh, Henry?"

Bolton colored. He gulped, searching for an answer. But the phone bell interrupted him. Slug leaped to answer it, hoping it was Wildcat Gordon. But the voice that came over the phone was that of Renlow Walton. The attorney asked for Wildcat. Slug told him that the commissioner was not there, but that he would be glad to take any message.

TINY TRAEGER

● Tiny is the dark-haired, pert daughter of old Quick Trigger. A diminutive bundle of loveliness, she nurses a secret devotion for Wildcat Gordon.

The lawyer's voice had none of the incisive quality that had made him famous in the courtroom. He sounded harried, distracted to the point of breaking down.

"My daughter, Gloria, has disappeared," Walton said heavily into the phone. "I found a notation in her room that she had been talking to Tiny Traeger. But I can't raise the Traeger penthouse on the phone."

Slug grunted that he would check up on Quick Trigger's home and see what he could learn. Slug was going to hang up. But it seemed that the attorney wanted to talk.

"I've had enough trouble in this thing," he said plaintively. "All I want is to get Gloria back and go away for a long rest. My business is shot, anyway."

Walton touched on another subject that didn't mean anything to Slug Minor at that moment. Later, it seemed to have been of tremendous importance.

"I'm going to close up both my duplex apartment and my country place in Westchester," Renlow Walton said. "I think I shall go to South America."

Slug mumbled his sympathy for the lawyer's troubles and said he would start looking for Gloria right away. Then he hung up the phone.

"I think that guy's behind this racket," Slug growled to Henry. "He's been actin' damned suspicious from the beginnin'."

Bolton sat suddenly erect and dropped his feet from Wildcat's desk. There was horror on his face.

"Why, Renlow Walton is one of the strongest supporters of the administration," he gasped. "He couldn't be involved in anything like this."

Bolton's awe of power made him really believe that no one who held a shadow of influence over his job could be a criminal. His long nose fairly quivered as he rejected any such theory.

"Jeremiah Stoncut is the more likely criminal," he insisted. "Didn't he have possession of the Corello diamonds before they were found to be switched with synthetics. And Stoncut would know all about the jewels of wealthy people on Park Avenue."

Slug Minor refused to answer. He picked up the phone and again dialed the number of Quick Trigger's penthouse. There was no answer.

"That's queer," he grumbled. "Somebody oughtta be home there at this hour in the mornin'. Let's go over and find out what's the matter."

Bolton stood up and stretched. Inactivity was even beginning to bore Henry.

"All right," he muttered. "We'll probably find they're both asleep."

They took Wildcat's car from the police garage. Slug eased himself behind the wheel and tooled the big sedan across town toward the Hudson River. Produce trucks rumbled along the water front, laden with early morning deliveries. River ferries tooted lonesome blasts in warning signals to other craft.

The warehouse that supported Quick Trigger's penthouse was silent. Slug Minor led the way to the elevator. A growing feeling of tension enveloped him as the cage whirred to the penthouse level.

As the elevator door slid back, Slug Minor gasped. He saw the girl he still knew only as Sophie, a gun moll of the underworld, lashed tightly to the chair. Henry Bolton's fish mouth made bubble-blowing motions.

He strode quickly to the girl.

"Now, I'll find out who you are and what you're doing in this mess," he snarled.

Henry ripped the gag from her mouth and glared down at her.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "Quick, now. I'm not going to fool with you."

Henry drew back his hand, as if he were going to slap the girl. Gloria Walton's blue eyes were defiant. She thrust out her jaw determinedly and insisted that her name was Sophie. Slug Minor interrupted Bolton's rough questioning.

"I've seen her around the Chariot

of Fire mission," he rumbled. "She's a mob gal, all right."

Henry Bolton whined agreement to the conclusion that she was nothing but a crook. Henry jerked the chair to which she was tied. He stuck a powerful flashlight directly before her eyes, turned its full glare into them.

"You might as well give up," he rasped. "I'll find out who you are before I'm through."

The girl's eyes faltered. She knew that in time, the police would find out her identity. Two persons knew it already. Wildcat Gordon and The Whisperer had learned. She had told The Whisperer. How the police commissioner had learned it, she did not know. Gloria shrugged.

"All right," she gave in. "I'm Gloria Walton, daughter of Renlow Walton, the attorney."

Henry Bolton dropped his flashlight in astonishment. His attitude changed immediately. But it was Slug Minor's turn to bark accusations now. Renlow Walton's position and power didn't mean a thing to Wildcat Gordon's burly chauffeur.

"I told y'u that Walton was the guy behind this thing," he bellowed. "I'll bet he hired those kids whose names are on Metro Estange's list. Then he had 'em join the mission to throw suspicion in that direction!"

Slug's eyes burned with excitement as he developed his theory. He repeated his suspicion that Renlow Walton was the only figure in the mystery sufficiently intimate socially and financially with the Park Avenue set to get the information he would have needed to start his reign of crime by jewel substitution.

Gloria Walton's blue eyes went wide with terror. She protested violently that her father was not the master criminal behind the jewel thefts.

"Then," Slug rapped, "maybe you can tell us what y'u've been messin' aroun' in this thing for."

The color drained from Gloria's face. Again her jaw showed strong lines of determination.

"I have nothing to say," she snapped. "You can't make me talk; so you might as well stop trying."

Slug Minor gloated.

"I'll bet y'u're on Metro Estange's list of converts," he bellowed. "I'll bet y'u're all set to throw more suspicion toward him when the blow-up comes."

Slug cut the bonds that held the girl. He paid no attention to the protests of Henry Bolton. He made no effort to hide his contempt for Henry's awe of power.

"We'll go to the Chariot of Fire right now and find out," Slug grunted. "And, Henry, if you don't come, I'll make a complete report to Wildcat. We'll see what he thinks of dodging an arrest just because of political connections."

Henry Bolton knew all too well what Wildcat would think of such a thing. He shuddered. Two converging fires seemed to be about to consume Henry.

"I'll go," he whined. "But you'd better be right about this. I still think Stoncut is the guy behind it."

Slug put the girl in the front seat of Wildcat's sedan beside him. Henry Bolton rode complaining in the back. Slug tore across town with the accelerator on the floorboards and the siren screaming wide open. Tires screamed as he wrenched the machine to a stop in front of the dingy mission.

Through the half-glass door, they could see the skinny evangelist padding among the ancient derelicts

who had slept the night in wooden chairs. Slug Minor grunted in anticipation and shoved Gloria Walton through the door ahead of him.

Metro Estange turned to see who the new arrivals were. His pinched, underfed-appearing face showed no change of expression, whatever, on recognizing the three figures who thrust into the room. Metro merely joined the tips of his fingers and nodded unctuously.

"Ah, my friend from the police again," he greeted. "How can I now be of assistance to you?"

Slug Minor jerked a thumb at the girl.

"I want to know if this dame's joined up with you," he growled. "You'd know her as Sophie."

Metro Estange pursed his bluish lips. He shook his almost hairless head slowly.

"No. Unfortunately, she has not asked the aid of the Chariot of Fire," he replied. "I do not even know her name."

Henry Bolton thrust forward. He brandished the list of names Slug had gotten earlier from the skinny soul saver.

"These are phonies," he whined. "I don't believe any of these young men joined your mission."

Metro Estange tapped his skinny fingers together. He seemed hurt at such an accusation. He bowed slightly and, without a word of protest, padded into his shabby office. When he returned, he carried a sheaf of cards.

"All who seek the aid of the Chariot of Fire must sign their pledge to leave the ways of crime behind them," he said in his flavorless voice. "Here, you will find the signatures of those you doubt. You can test their authenticity at your leisure."

He handed the cards to Bolton. Henry gulped and looked somewhat foolish in the face of Metro's willingness to co-operate. Metro again joined the tips of his fingers. His head waggled back and forth on his skinny neck. An expression of deep pain crossed his pinched features.

"The resistance of the younger converts to true salvation grieves me," he said flatly. "It brings me to wonder if this mission is succeeding at all in its purpose."

Derelicts in nearby chairs struggled to their feet at Metro's words. Cracked voices rose in words of protest.

"My only hope in life is in the mission," an old crone shrilled in a squeaky voice.

"We all need the mission," another chimed in. "It gives us food for both the body and the soul."

Metro beamed upon them. But he permitted his shoulders to droop wearily.

"I am an old man," he said. "Perhaps I am really too old to lead youth into the path of righteousness."

Metro waggled his head again and padded toward his office. Apparently, he considered the interview finished.

Slug Minor grunted in annoyance. He took Gloria Walton by the elbow, escorted her to the street. Henry Bolton trailed along behind them. Neither Slug nor Henry was pleased with the fruit of their trip to the Chariot of Fire. Both considered that they had run against a dead end in their investigations.

But events were shaping up that brought both of them into possession of startling information. Gloria Walton broke the silence first.

"Jeremiah Stoncut may be the one behind it," she offered. "I saw

him in the jewel clearing house of Morrie Manx."

Henry Bolton snapped at that suggestion. It seemed to provide a chance to prove that he had been right.

"I always knew that midget was a fence," Henry whined. "We'll take a look at his joint. It's only about a block away."

Slug grunted again. He didn't have any reason to oppose the check-up. Slug still shoved the girl ahead of him. He elected to walk the short distance to the establishment of Morrie Manx. Both Slug and Henry watched the entrance of Morrie's place as they approached. They were so intent on their objective that neither noticed the rush of gangsters until they were surrounded!

The mobbies swept on the three figures from behind. Slug Minor let loose a bellow of rage and waded into the milling thugs. Slug didn't even pause to pull out his .38. He swung his lethal fists like sledges. Henry Bolton whipped out his own gun and began to blast away.

A gun butt slashed down on Henry's wrist, paralyzing the muscles. His gun clattered to the sidewalk. A bludgeon thudded against Slug Minor's skull and sent him reeling against the brick wall of a building.

Then it became apparent that the object of the mobsters was to kidnap Gloria Walton! Either to rescue her from the police or to prevent her telling what she knew, crime was moving in to snatch the girl.

Bolton and Slug were backed against the wall. Tommy-guns menaced them! They were hopelessly outnumbered by the thugs. These mobbies were the scarred veterans of crime who had entered the crime master's scheme of things after the young hoods had performed their tasks.

Gloria Walton did not appear to think she was being rescued. She fought wildly against her captors. Ugly thugs cuffed her roughly, slapped her into submission.

Then, with the suddenness of a summer squall, aid came to Gloria Walton. With a snarling oath, the blank-faced thug known as Kid Sulphur hurtled from a crevice between two buildings. Guns flamed in each hand of the young killer.

He rasped his hate for the gunmen who held the girl. His lead plowed into their bodies! They fell to the street, blood gushing from their mouths.

Then the Tommy-gun began to chatter. Red blood oozed through Kid Sulphur's clothing. He buckled in the middle, as if his body was a great hinge. But Sulphur went down fighting. Even as his eyes began to glaze, he kept pumping lead from his automatics.

Slug had his guns blasting by that time. Bolton recovered his and used his left hand as best he could. At that moment sirens began to scream down the street. The melee had attracted the attention of a cruising radio patrol.

The green-and-white coupé roared down the street. The blast of a police riot gun mingled with the chatter of the Tommy. The mobbies dispersed without their quarry. They fired parting shots as they ran, leaving six of their number dead on the blood-spattered sidewalk.

But also dead was Kid Sulphur. He lay on his back, his sightless eyes staring into the early morning sky. And now, prostrate over his body, crouched Gloria Walton. The blond daughter of the attorney

moaned softly. She swayed from side to side, as if an emotion too great to bear was consuming her.

"Oh, Jimmy! You died trying to protect me!"

Then Gloria stood erect. Her face was twisted into lines of misery. Tears coursed unashamedly down her cheeks. The girl seemed broken, stripped of the defiance with which she had faced Slug and Henry Bolton.

"H-he was my brother, Jimmy," Gloria said in a low, husky voice, "He wasn't killed by a freight train as the newspapers said. After he ran away from home, he was framed in a freight-car robbery; he wasn't guilty. Another young hobo was the one killed in the accident in

There seemed to be two Whisperers. The gunmen hesitated, not knowing which was friend and which was foe.

the West. Jimmy felt so badly about the disgrace that would befall the family through the robbery frame-up that he told police the dead youth was Jimmy Walton."

Gloria paused. Sobs racked her body.

"Jimmy wrote me once," she said. "We were always very close. He told me what had happened. And he told me that his face had been scarred beyond recognition in another accident."

Slug Minor put one hand on the girl's shoulder. The giant was contrite. His voice was strangely soft for Slug.

"I'm sorry, kid," he told her. "I'm ashamed of myself for goin' after you the way I did."

Gloria tried to smile. Her eyes told Slug that she didn't blame him for trying to do his duty.

"I was trying to get Jimmy away from this gang," she explained. "Whoever the crime master is, he kept his hold on Jimmy by threatening to expose the past. The crime master also called dad and threatened to expose Jimmy unless he withdrew his prosecution of Stoncut."

Then a new fear seemed to add to the woes of the blond girl who had gambled her life in an effort to save her brother.

"Tiny Traeger!" she gasped. "Now, I've been the cause of her being in danger of her life!"

CHAPTER XIV.

FIRE FOR DEATH!

Gloria Walton did not exaggerate the fact. For crime's plan certainly included the death of Tiny Traeger and her father. Dasher Kudno and Ripper discussed it on their long ride into the Westchester hills.

"This way we clean up all the details in one job," Dasher explained. "The boss has to burn the house because it would look suspicious if anyone found the gadgets we got in it. The boss wouldn't have any reason for having all them secret rooms and panels."

Ripper grunted.

"Yeah!" he agreed. "The old cop and the girl have to go because they know too much."

Kudno grinned.

"An' The Whisperer goes with 'em," he sneered. "That's the payoff. It's too bad the boys all over the country can't know who the boss is. I bet they'd take up a hell of a collection for him."

Ripper rubbed his hands together and talked of the big payoff. It seemed that the crime master had promised a special bonus for the destruction of The Whisperer.

Dasher tooled the hearse into the driveway that led to the Westchester hide-out. He stopped beside two squarish stone pillars that guarded the entrance. An iron chain hung between the two. Dasher unhooked the chain. Then he inspected a tiny hole in one stone post. A movable stone swung back.

A photo-electric cell meter, there, informed Dasher that no person or vehicle had traversed that driveway since he had left it the night before!

Then he drove the hearse close to the wide steps of the porch before he stopped. He got out and unlocked the rear door. Ripper stood behind him, a submachine gun in his arms, as Dasher swung the door open. These two were taking no chances with The Whisperer. A juicy bonus awaited the successful completion of the task at hand.

The Whisperer was still manacled hand and foot when the two thugs dragged him out and up the steps of the rambling building. The crime foe had no opportunity to see what the building looked like.

They dragged The Whisperer into a large room that seemed to be a sort of office and dumped their prisoner on the floor.

"Think I'll check up on the other prisoners before we shove this one in," Dasher muttered. "We gotta be careful this time."

Dasher Kudno's precaution was a wise one, for Quick Trigger had managed to free himself of his bonds. His wrists raw from the chafing he had given them, Quick Trigger had found a passageway leading out of the prison that held himself and Tiny.

The thugs had missed a tiny pen-

cil flashlight that Quick carried in his vest pocket. Now, with that flash, Quick crouched in a narrow passageway that was directly behind the room in which The Whisperer was a prisoner.

The old deputy did not hear the words that passed between Dasher Kudno and Ripper. The walls of the rambling building were effectively soundproofed.

The first indication Quick had that crime's agents had returned was a sudden illumination in the corridor in which he crouched. Quick retreated quickly, toward a hatchlike access trap at the other end of the passageway. It was through that trap that he had crawled up from the prison room below.

But Quick did not reach the trap in time! There was a sudden click and a panel slid closed over that trap. The whole house was built in sections that could be isolated from the others by sliding panels. It was like the water-tight sections of a submarine. Trouble could be bottled up in any of those sections.

Quick Trigger found himself trapped between a cold steel wall and Dasher Kudno. For another panel slid back and Dasher stepped into the passageway from the office.

Dasher Kudno was armed; Quick had nothing but his tiny pencil flash. But Quick Trigger had the advantage of surprise. He executed the only maneuver that might have helped him. Quick launched a swift, frontal attack. He leaped for Dasher Kudno in silent fury, struck the gangster squarely, smashing him to the floor.

Quick growled in a premature sense of victory. For Ripper had heard his pal fall to the floor. Before Quick Trigger could smash home a paralyzing blow, Ripper was upon him. The escaped convict clubbed Quick into unconsciousness. Then the two slid open the panel to the hatchway and dragged the old man back down into the room from which he had escaped.

Tiny Traeger still surged against her bonds in one of the two iron chairs. Her blue eyes flashed with anger when she saw her unconscious father dragged back into the room. When she saw the way old Quick's head flopped back and forth as if his neck were broken, fear replaced the rage in her eyes.

"Y-you've killed him!" she gasped.

Dasher Kudno laughed harshly.

"You ain't seen nothin' yet, sister," he snarled. "We're goin' to burn this joint down with you in it in an hour or two." He smirked satanically. "Before that, though, I guess you'll have a visitor," he added.

Dasher tied Quick to the chair again. He looked at Tiny's bonds to be sure they were still tightly tied. Then he yelled to Ripper.

"O. K., bring the other guy down."

Ripper appeared, dragging the manacled figure of The Whisperer. He tossed the black-clad foe into the room and strode out of the prison room with Dasher.

As soon as the steel wall panel slid shut, Tiny Traeger moved. Quick Trigger had feared that he might be caught and dragged back to the prison. So he had untied Tiny. Then he had retied her skillfully with knots that looked as if they were secure. But they were tied in such a fashion that one tug would rip them apart.

Tiny rushed to her father and untied his bonds. Quick was conscious, now. His pale eyes stared at The Whisperer. Quick noticed one thing swiftly. The manacles on his wrists and ankles pulled apart as if they were made of wax! Slowly, the foe of crime began to turn.

The Whisperer had weakened those links with acid he carried in a tiny vial, concealed in his coat cuffs. He had not yet spoken to Quick Trigger. The wily foe of crime feared that they might be under observation through some hidden peephole.

But Quick Trigger got the wrong impression. The parting handcuffs looked like fakes to him. Quick jumped to the conclusion that this was the false Whisperer, who had returned to get some information from him. With a roar, Quick sprang upon him, slamming at him with sledge-hammer fists!

The Whisperer twisted sharply. Breath hissed between his teeth.

"Make it look real, now," he said. "They may be watching."

Quick Trigger was so dumfounded he almost gave the show away. He recognized the voice that hissed through the dental plates that he, himself, had manufactured. He knew that this *was* The Whisperer. Instinctively, Quick Trigger shot a glance at Tiny.

Tiny was back in her chair. Apparently, she had fainted from the excitement. If she had heard the words that passed between Quick Trigger and The Whisperer, she never admitted it to anyone. Slowly, she raised her head. Her eyelids flickered, as if she were just returning to consciousness. A look of surprise flashed in her eyes.

"The Whisperer!" she exclaimed. "Why are you a prisoner?"

The ghostly voice floated through the room.

"That does not matter," The Whisperer said. "What does matter is that we must all get out. They are going to burn the house down."

Quick explained that he had reached the upper passageway because a sliding panel had not entirely closed. He had managed to wedge his pencil flash into the crack and force the panel back. While Quick was talking, the wraithlike foe of crime knelt beside one of the metal chairs that were screwed into the floor. Using a coin for a screwdriver, The Whisperer went to work on the chair. Swiftly, he freed the chair from its moorings, picked it up.

By twisting one flat-ribbed leg over the other chair, The Whisperer managed to break it off. He had a small crowbar, then, which might be used to force one of the sliding panels in the walls of the room. There was one panel that had not closed entirely. It was not the one through which Quick Trigger had tried to escape, but it was the only chance of exit that presented itself.

Working delicately, so that he would not break his improvised tool, The Whisperer slid the panel back. Then, with Quick Trigger's tiny flashlight, the three prisoners moved quietly down a long corridor.

The corridor ended in a large room that seemed to be some sort of storage space. There were boxes, barrels and cans of many sizes and shapes. Near the top were apertures that seemed to be cellar windows. Each of them was covered with sheets of solid steel.

The Whisperer padded about the place in silent inspection. A soft chuckle escaped his lips as he investigated some of the boxes. Then a gentle, whirring sound interrupted his search. Quickly, The Whisperer located the source of the noise.

He found a telephone lineman's headset on a nail in a dark corner of the room. It was hooked into the telephone line that came in from outside at that point. Apparently,

this storeroom stronghold was a place where the master mind eavesdropped on the phone conversations his henchmen held in the house above. The device was strictly one for listening in; there was no mouthpiece.

Swiftly, The Whisperer clamped the device to his ears.

"The hell you say," Dasher Kudno's voice rasped into the earphones.

"I do say it, and I want you to move fast," a voice rasped over the wire. "The girl is on the loose again. Kid Sulphur is dead and the cops know who he is. Burn the house down and do it fast. Then get back to headquarters."

Dasher grunted in compliance.

"How about the other job?" he grated.

A note of triumph crept into the other voice. The tones were disguised, as if he had pebbles or marbles in his mouth. But the gloating assurance of success in crime was evident in his tones.

"One p. m. today," he sneered. "Right on the dot, and we'll all be wealthy."

"O. K., boss," Dasher gloated. "Everything here is set for the wind-up. We're on our way."

There were two clicks as the crime master and his lieutenant hung up their phones. The Whisperer removed the headset and repeated the conversation to Quick Trigger and Tiny. Old Quick gasped.

"One p. m. sharp, for the Maharaja's jewels," he grunted. "Why, one p. m. is the hour for Jeremiah Stoncut's afternoon inspection of the gems!"

"Exactly," The Whisperer said. "The jewels in the Stuyvesant Galleries will be stolen without a single cop's knowing that it is being done!"

A rumbling explosion interrupted The Whisperer! The big house seemed about to be shaken from its foundations. Then the roaring sound of flames crackled in the ears of the three prisoners.

"The place is fired," Quick rumbled. "And I don't see a chance in a million of getting out of here."

An eerie, whispering challenge answered Quick Trigger. The Whisperer moved swiftly toward one pile of boxes.

"When the fire reaches these, there won't be enough left of this house to use for kindling wood," he said in his husky, low voice. "All dynamite."

Quickly, he tore open one box and took out a yellow stick of dynamite. He piled other boxes together, making a crude stairway to the steel-shuttered cellar windows. Behind one of those shutters, he wedged the stick of dynamite. Another box yielded cotton-wick fuse. Still chuckling softly, The Whisperer set his fuse.

"Back into the corridor," he whispered. "As far as you can go."

Then he scratched a match and touched it to the end of his fuse. As the flame sputtered toward the tightly wedged stick of dynamite, he ran swiftly down the corridor after the other two prisoners.

Before he reached them the blast let loose. There was a tremendous roar that hurled them all to the floor of the corridor. The acrid stench of burned dynamite stung their nostrils. The concussion was deafening.

The Whisperer leaped to his feet and motioned Quick and Tiny to follow. He raced back into the big storeroom, shoved the boxes back into formation to make a new set of stairs to the blasted cellar window. The window wasn't there any more.

SLUG MINOR

● Wildcat Gordon's untiring effort once saved Slug Minor, then a water-front roustabout, from a framed robbery charge. The giant Slug has since endeavored to repay the commissioner's complete faith in his role as Wildcat's chauffeur and strong-arm aid.

Nor was the steel shield that had concealed it.

There was only a raw, gaping hole. Through that, The Whisperer crawled. Behind him came Quick and Tiny. The heat of the blazing house fanned their cheeks as they emerged into the late-morning air. The house was a raging inferno of smoke and flame. The crime master had apparently planted highly inflammable materials in every room.

Half of the great house had already fallen in. It was no longer possible to tell what the whole house had looked like. Part of what was now standing was engulfed in heavy smoke.

The three erstwhile prisoners could not hear the roaring of the flames. They were still temporarily deafened by the concussion of the blast that had freed them.

Nor could they hear the swift thrust of Dasher Kudno and Ripper from behind them! The crime lieutenants had been instructed to remain on the ground until they were certain that the three doomed captives had actually perished in the blaze.

Dasher slugged out with a blackjack. Ripper used the butt of his gun. With Quick and The Whisperer unconscious, Tiny Traeger was a simple problem. Dasher began to haul them back toward the blaze. But a wail of sirens interrupted him. The local fire department had been summoned by someone who had seen the blaze.

Dasher had no time to thrust his prisoners back into the blaze. Instead, he and Ripper piled them into the body of the hearse, which was parked just behind them.

"Hell," Dasher grumbled. "We gotta get out of here, ourselves. We'll take 'em down to the chariot of fire in the underground dungeon."

Dasher was acting on his own in that last decision. There didn't seem to be anything else to do. But Dasher was hurried in his departure. The fire engines were almost upon the place. Kudno did not want to be around to answer questions he knew would be asked.

That was the reason that he wasn't as careful as he should have been in relocking the back door of the

hearse. The rumbling trip back to the city helped loosen the latch that was operated only from the outside. Every jounce and bump loosened it just that much more.

The Whisperer saw the narrow crack appear between the two sections of the back. With a husky chuckle, he nudged his two companions. Then he launched himself at the door, striking it with his shoulder. The door burst open and The Whisperer hurtled to the street. Dasher and Ripper heard that bursting door and slammed on the brakes.

As the hearse ground to a halt, Quick and Tiny piled out behind The Whisperer. Before Dasher and Ripper could climb out and get their guns into action, The Whisperer and his friends raced between two buildings and through an alley that led to another street.

The Whisperer paused when they reached a place of safety. He looked at his watch. It was fifteen minutes before one o'clock in the afternoon —fifteen minutes before crime's master had promised to steal two and a half million dollars worth of jewelry from under the noses of more than a score of cops in the Stuyvesant Galleries!

An eerie, whispering chuckle escaped the enemy of crime.

"There is no time to lose," he said softly. "You had best go at once to the Stuyvesant Galleries."

The Whisperer turned away, gliding swiftly toward the center of the city.

Crime's most potent enemy had plans of his own with which to deal with the kingpin of crime. And right now, time alone was the greatest hurdle in his obstacle race toward justice.

Quick Trigger grunted and flagged a passing taxi.

CHAPTER XV.

CRIME UNMASKED.

A heavy overcast sky blotted out the sun and a hint of rain sent pedestrians scurrying on their way lest they be caught in the impending downpour.

Inside the great building that housed the Stuyvesant Galleries, uniformed cops stood guard at appointed posts.

As the hands of the big electric clock approached one o'clock, the cops on guard unconsciously stiffened to attention. Each day, at one, they had been accustomed to the routine inspection by Jeremiah Stoncut.

Precisely on the stroke of one, the familiar wispy figure appeared and the guard greeted him.

"Good day, Mr. Stoncut," he rumbled. "I see you are right on time."

"P-punctuality is a n-necessary v-v-virtue," the old, stammering voice answered him.

The wispy man with the faltering steps moved slowly to the nearest display case. He seemed in no hurry to complete his task. But Jeremiah Stoncut never seemed in a hurry. The cops paid scarcely any attention to him as he opened his small brief case and took out his jeweler's glass. Stoncut's inspections were too routine to instill any curiosity in the minds of these policemen. They were here only to prevent violence.

They did not notice the sudden furtive actions of their visitor. The slight figure scarcely glanced through the inspection glass at all. Talonlike hands were too busy for that. Each time, he picked up a precious stone, the one that was put back came from the other hand, where it had been cleverly palmed by the visitor!

Even with his slow-appearing

movement, the inspector of the jewels was really moving rapidly. That sure speed, plus the fact that the expected deluge of rain had arrived, prevented Quick Trigger and Tiny from arriving in time to prevent this amazing substitution.

The grayish, faltering visitor padded unhurriedly out of the great room before Quick came storming in.

"Has Stoncut been here?" Quick roared when he pounded up the corridor. The cop at the door informed him that Stoncut had, indeed, been there and left. Quick's face grew apoplectic.

"That's the big shot behind all this crime wave!" Quick bellowed. "Go after him! Get him! He's got the real Kohore jewels!"

The Stuyvesant Galleries was turned suddenly into a scene of turmoil and confusion. The police barred the door, milling about excitedly. But before that door was closed, a dim figure moved into the room and glanced quickly at the jewels that had been left behind by the master thief.

A low, whispering chuckle filled the room. The Whisperer darted quickly to a phone booth in one corner of the room. Just as he slid shut the door, the cops pounded back into the room. It seemed that the crime master had been too quick for them. He had vanished in the rain-swept street.

The Whisperer dialed a number and asked a question. His green eyes gleamed oddly as he emerged from the booth. He had ascertained the identity of the great house in Westchester that had burned mysteriously that morning.

It was the convalescent home for spiritual ailments operated by Metro Estange!

The Whisperer moved swiftly then. Quick Trigger was back in the great room. The wraithlike foe of crime whispered softly to old Quick, then drifted out of the room. That was not difficult in the confusion that reigned there.

The Whisperer leaped into his black coupé, which he had retrieved after leaving Quick and Tiny. He knew that the master crook had instructed Dasher and Ripper to return to headquarters. The Whisperer could not be certain just which headquarters the kingpin of crime had meant. But he took a chance. He raced his black coupé down to the Bowery and stopped in front of the Chariot of Fire under the elevated structure.

The Whisperer plunged into the main room of the mission. There was a queer air of excitement there. Startled fear showed on the lined faces of the derelicts. Metro Estange was nowhere to be seen! The compact foe of crime raced to the door of Metro's private office, whipped it open. There he saw the wispy figure of Jeremiah Stoncut —or so it seemed!

With an eerie hiss of challenge, The Whisperer ripped away a wig of gray hair. A plastic mask from a mold of the face of the real Jeremiah Stoncut came away with it.

Beneath that mask smirked the sanctimonious features of Metro Estange!

Metro was the master criminal who had cleverly arranged a false trail toward himself, which would break down under scrutiny and make him appear an innocent victim of the machinations of some other mysterious master of the underworld!

The Whisperer reached out to seize Metro. But he did not reckon with Dasher Kudno and Ripper. Those two able lieutenants of crime were flattened against the wall be-

side the door of Metro's office. They plunged onto The Whisperer, now. As they did, Metro stooped quickly and ripped open a trapdoor in the floor of his office. Through that, The Whisperer was shoved.

Metro laughed shortly. His voice was no longer flat, without inflection. It was sneeringly triumphant.

"That won't hold him long," he snarled. "But it doesn't matter. My yacht is ready and the speedboat is at the wharf. We'll soon be where extradition papers can be blocked for a reasonable fee."

Still laughing at his success, Metro raced out of the mission, followed by his henchmen. He carried the black brief case with which he had engineered the switch of the maharaja's gems.

The Whisperer was not quiet in the prison into which he had been thrust so suddenly. He flicked on a flashlight. A groan sounded beside him. There, on the dank cellar floor, was the real Jeremiah Stoncut, bound and gagged. The Whisperer delayed long enough to free Stoncut.

The wispy jewel expert blurted his thanks. He said he had been trying to trace down gems he could tell by fault structures, carbon specks and other identifying marks. While he was trying to do that, so that he could recover gems he had been accused of stealing, he had been kidnaped and thrown into this prison.

The Whisperer had no time for conversation. He bade Stoncut brace himself against the wall. Swiftly, The Whisperer climbed to his shoulder. Then he was out of the trap. He tossed a chair down to Stoncut so that the jeweler might climb to freedom, himself.

Then The Whisperer tore out of the building, leaped into his coupé. The machine screamed around the corner toward the docks and headed for the ancient wharf below which was the torture dungeon.

The racketing of a speedboat came to the crime fighter's ears as his machine raced along. He did not stop before the dock, but jounced the car over it. Then, The Whisperer was on the edge of the wharf. Supersilenced pistols leaped into his hands. Blue flame hissed from them.

The speedboat was less than fifty feet from the dock. It had been tied well under the piling, out of sight of the prying eyes of the harbor police. That had delayed Metro Estange and his two henchmen.

Dasher Kudno was at the wheel of the trim little boat. The Whisperer's bullets found Dasher! Blood spurted from the crime lieutenant's neck. Dasher slumped over the wheel. The speedboat careened wildly, completely out of control. It described an arc and headed back toward the dock.

Ripper was standing up in the stern cockpit. Automatics in his hands flamed, poured lead at The Whisperer! Ripper was so occupied in his determination to kill the enemy of crime that, at first, he did not see that Dasher was done for; that the speedboat was out of control. He thought Dasher was being smart, was zigzagging to avoid The Whisperer's bullets.

Metro Estange screamed in rage and frustration. He clambered over the engine housing to the front cockpit and grabbed the steering wheel. But before he could twist it back, he had to drag Dasher Kudno's body from it.

That took time.

There was a grinding crash as the speedboat smashed head-on into the pilings of a nearby dock. The im-

pact hurled Ripper from the boat, headfirst into the water. It so happened that the escaped convict could not swim. He sank quickly.

But Metro Estange was not finished. The brief case was slung around his neck by a long cord. The skinny evangelist held a gun in each hand! The impact of the crash did not throw Metro into the water. Instead, it hurled him to the low dock against which the speedboat wrecked itself. The erstwhile operator of the Chariot of Fire scrambled to his feet, scampered to the cover of many crates piled upon the dock.

He fired at The Whisperer from behind those temporary barricades. Metro Estange could shoot! His first slug whirled The Whisperer around. The lone battler against crime was not badly injured. The heavy-caliber slug struck his bulletproof vest. But the impact knocked him down and gave Metro Estange a chance to flee.

The Whisperer recovered his footing, leaped to the dock over which Metro was weaving. The crime fighter steadied himself and took careful aim. But a watchman on the dock thwarted his shot. The man was excited, rushing out to see what all the excitement was about. He got right in the line of fire. Metro Estange laughed harshly; he seized the man and used him for a shield.

But the sudden scream of sirens startled Metro. The shooting had attracted the police. Metro backed from his human shield, moving swiftly toward the edge of the dock.

The Whisperer sensed his intention. He had seen another small boat tied down there. It might offer Metro a chance to escape. The crime foe knew that the master criminal had a labyrinth of hidden passageways underneath these docks. If Metro could reach one of them, he might emerge unnoticed in some other part of the water front.

And Metro had to be caught.

Carefully, The Whisperer sighted. Blue flame lanced out. The silenced gun hissed weirdly. Metro Estange threw up his hands and screamed in pain.

The watchman he had been using for a shield flung himself to the dock, giving The Whisperer a clear view of the kingpin of crime. Once again the silenced guns spoke their piece. Metro Estange doubled. Blood dripped from his midriff. His bluish lips twisted in agony. Slowly, he sank to the edge of the dock.

Other feet pounded up then. The police were converging on the dock from all sides. Quick Trigger's bald pate appeared. The old deputy took in the situation at a glance.

"Hold your fire!" he yelled to his men. "We want those jewels more than we want a dead man."

The order sounded logical to the cops. And it gave The Whisperer a chance to get away. Such was the plan of old Quick Trigger.

The Whisperer advanced swiftly on Metro Estange. The sanctimonious master of crime straightened in one mighty effort. A crazed laugh issued from his lips. His eyes blazed with an insane determination.

Metro Estange was through. He was well aware of that. But his warped brain burned with a hatred for the justice he had fought against. Skinny hands pawed quickly into the brief case. Before anyone could stop him, Metro hurled brightly flashing gems far out into the murky waters of the East River!

The stones cascaded down like handfuls of brilliant pebbles, to sink, lost forever in the silt bottom of the river that flows with a riptide into the Atlantic Ocean!

Blood dribbled from Metro's mouth as he laughed in his final mortal effort.

"What I cannot have, no one else shall profit by," he sneered.

Then Metro Estange died. He slumped, toppled from the dock's edge into the chill, muddy water.

The cops roared in anger and rushed out upon the dock. With a whispering chuckle of defiance, The Whisperer before them raced to the edge and plunged into the river after the dead master of the underworld.

The Whisperer did not appear on the surface of the river. Only the dead body of Metro Estange floated there. And with him was gone the knowledge that had held in criminal bondage the youth of the city who had wandered, unwittingly into the paths of crime. The gangsters who were really guilty would be rounded up. The Whisperer knew of their deeds.

When Wildcat did appear on the dock a few minutes later, there was much confusion and many different stories of what had occurred. Wildcat was dripping wet. A long swim underneath the docks had done that for him. But that condition went unnoticed in the drenching downpour of the rain.

"What's going on here?" Wildcat demanded. "What was all this shooting?"

Henry Bolton who had just come up, took it upon himself to explain.

"We got the master crook," he said nasally. "I think we got The Whisperer as well."

Quick Trigger looked down his nose at Henry.

"Yeah," he rumbled. "But we didn't get those jewels. That's two and a half million dollars scattered into the water like a handful of sand."

Wildcat barked a quick exclamation of surprise.

"There must be some mistake," he rapped. "I've just called the Stuyvesant Galleries. The real jewels are there, now. Someone must have switched them on the master crook before he got around to doing it."

A rumble of surprise went up from the assembled cops. Who, they wondered, could have done a thing like that. Tiny Traeger supplied what she considered the answer.

"It was probably The Whisperer," she said, looking hard at Wildcat Gordon. "He seems to get a lot more done than the police do."

But for once, Tiny Traeger was wrong. Wildcat grinned as he thought of the quick job of switching gems he had done the night before when he had pretended to examine those jewels in the Stuyvesant Galleries. It was true that The Whisperer had stolen the false gems from the clearing house of Morrie Manx, the midget. And The Whisperer had replaced them with the genuine stones after Wildcat had done the switching.

Metro Estange, the master criminal, was no jewel expert. He had hired Morrie Manx to do that work for him. And Metro had carried with him to the Galleries the gems worth two and a half million dollars. He had left them there and taken away as loot, the nearly worthless synthetics he had paid Morrie Manx to make!

It seemed to the cops assembled there that they heard a ghostly whisper in the rain as they thought how that knowledge would have enraged the master mind of crime.

But, of course, that was merely their imagination.

THE END

PREMONITION

By William G. Bogart

Tim Reilly knew that some day, somewhere, he was going to meet up with the man who had killed his father.

He thought of this each night as he pounded his midnight-to-dawn beat that took him from Fifth Avenue to the dismal warehouse district beyond Eighth, toward the North River. In those long, dreary hours before dawn, while this part of the great city slept, young Tim Reilly often thought of that night his father had died, going on three months, now.

There had been that robbery in a fur loft, with gray-haired Timothy Reilly, veteran of the plain-clothes detail, leading his men after thieves escaping with fifty grand in furs. And the gun fight. And Timothy Reilly, standing there in an alley-

way, pumping lead after the escaping thugs until he was able to stand no longer, until he had collapsed in a bloody heap, his body pierced by three slugs.

Young Tim wondered if he could ever erase the terrible memory from his mind!

For young Tim—barely a month on the force as a harness cop—had just come on duty scarcely an hour before, and he had heard the gunfire as he strolled his beat. He had reached there in time to hold his dying father in his arms.

There had been words whispered that night—dying words as Old Tim described the killer to his son.

"That devil has no name, boy," his father had gasped. "Just call him 'Rat.' It . . . it's the third time I've almost caught up with him and his gang. He's never been trapped, and . . . and he isn't known. But watch out for him. Watch out for that killer with one glass eye!"

That had been all. Timothy had died then.

But in that moment, young Tim had taken an oath. "I'll get him, pop. I'll get that guy!"

So the killer, to young Tim Reilly, was known only as Rat. His father had brought down two of the man's aids with his own shots, but those two others had died, too, without naming their leader. There had never been a clue to one who had escaped.

Just the same, Tim knew that some day the time would come.

Strangely, the premonition came to him this night only an hour after he'd been on duty. Perhaps it had come earlier, but he wasn't sure. He knew that he had been somewhat restless; yet it was only after he was left all to himself, patrolling the deserted side streets, that the real feeling came to him.

Tim's nightly tour seldom varied. When he first came on, at midnight, there was still some activity happening at various corners along his beat. At Sixth Avenue, for instance, there was old Abe and his subway newsstand. Each night Tim would pause for a chat, as Abe prepared to close up. There was the war and news about Mrs. Bernstein's baby and the trouble old Abe was having with the secondhand magazine shops down the street.

At Seventh Avenue, as Tim would tell you, he always had to put Mama Stevens to bed. The elderly woman had been running the delicatessen since way back when. Each night she waited until good-looking young Tim Reilly made his first rounds; then she would empty her till and lock up and let the harness cop escort her to her rooming house, midway between the two avenues. Mama often said that it wasn't very nice walking down the dim side street after midnight. It wasn't very cheerful at all.

At Eighth, Tim always stopped at Little Joe's for a cup of coffee, and the nights were getting chilly enough, now, that you needed something to keep you going. It was always well after one o'clock, though, by the time Tim got to Little Joe's, because in the long blocks between the avenues he had to try doors and see that garbage cans weren't placed where people would fall over them in the dark and check over parked cars that weren't customarily here.

By the time he got over toward Ninth, things were usually pretty quiet. Because there weren't any more stores now, and everybody was in bed. It was a district of warehouses and old buildings that had

fallen into disrepair. And one or two bars.

But even the latter closed up before two o'clock, because business over here was pretty bad after that.

Tonight, one of Tim's last stops was at Charlie's Grill. Charlie ran a good, respectable place, and some of the older men gathered there and played pinochle. He didn't cater to drunks. And that's why young Tim liked the man. He always stopped in to see stout, friendly Charlie and have a word.

Tim stood at the bar tonight, sipping a cup of coffee. And as at every one of his stops along his route, the talk shifted to the war.

Tim listened a little while; then he glanced at the clock behind the bar. It was two, and time he was getting along.

He started to say: "Well, I'll be seeing you—" when something caused him to pause and look toward the doorway, at an angle behind him. He was certain that he had not heard the door open; yet he had the feeling that someone had come up behind him.

Tim stared.

No one was there, either behind him or at the bar. And yet he had the odd sensation that a man had brushed his shoulder as he passed.

Fat Charlie saw his thoughtful, intent expression, and asked curiously: "What's wrong, Tim?"

Tim shrugged, his healthy-looking features assuming a quick, easy smile.

"I . . . er . . . nothing, Charlie. I just thought of something." He started out. "See you tomorrow night."

But outside, he moved his shoulders uneasily, trying to throw off the feeling that had taken hold of him. As he moved down the long side street, he felt a foreboding presence; it was just as though someone were following him.

And yet the thoroughfare was deserted!

He continued on through the still, silent night, his footsteps making quiet echoes against building walls that loomed up like drab, gray ghosts all around him. Somewhere in the distance, an ambulance clamored its way up one of the avenues. The sound died on the night. There was only the silence, again, and the damp, raw chill from the nearby river.

Tim made a call-in from a box at two thirty, walked south to the next block, then started his long trek back toward Fifth. Nothing happened. It was one of the quietest nights he had put in for some time.

But there was still that unexplainable feeling—

It surged through him as he was returning again after three o'clock. He had just reached a street corner and was starting across, when he drew up and looked across the street. He was positive that someone had been over there a moment before. But, now, there was nothing save the baleful green eyes of a traffic light.

He continued across the street and on into the gloom of the deserted buildings.

A man had a lot of time to think on a beat like this. And Tim's thoughts always reverted to his father, of the night he had been killed, and of a man without a name —but who was like a rat. A rat that slithered out of a hidden, dark hole and disappeared back into it the same way. A ghost of the dark night. A killer!

His father had always said—

Suddenly, Tim *knew*. The thing came to him with startling impact. He didn't try to explain it; he didn't

try to lay it to any copper's hunch. It was just that it was here.

This was the night he was going to meet the killer!

Tim Reilly did not experience any feeling of danger. He did not move more cautiously past dark doorways and alleys. He merely plodded grimly ahead, his eyes sharp, as always, his brain clear.

He knew now what that moment back in the bar had signified. It was just as though he were being told. It was just as though a hand had rested confidently on his shoulder and someone had said: *"Be ready!"*

And he was.

Because of this, because he was accustomed to every slightest foreign sound that might occur on this lonely beat of his, young Tim Reilly observed the incident that happened —ahead of him and farther up the street—in the second before he was observed.

A shadowy figure had crossed from near a dim street light and merged with the gloom close to an alleyway.

Immediately Tim whipped against the building wall near him, edged forward, found an indentation that concealed his tall, lean form. He waited.

Ahead, nothing moved. Or rather, nothing seemed to. But Tim had been long enough on this job to know that shadows can be deceptive. So he waited a moment longer.

The faint, almost imperceptible scuff of a foot reached his ears. And then, his eyes boring into the gloom fifty yards ahead, he observed a darker blur against the darkness of a building wall.

A man stepped around the corner of the building and disappeared into the alleyway.

Silently, Tim Reilly moved forward again.

As he neared the alleyway, quiet sounds, feet moving in the night, reached his hearing. He edged up to the black bore of the alleyway and stared down its length. He stiffened.

Just inside the narrow thoroughfare, a car was parked. Lights had been switched off. And yet there was a light—a vague, dim glow that Tim saw just in time. The burning end of a cigarette!

Cautiously, without sound at all, Tim Reilly edged around the rear of the car and saw the man seated behind the wheel. The car was an open model, and there were a lot of cartons piled up in the rear seat. Funny that anyone should be here, at this hour, in complete darkness and—

The man behind the wheel jerked around! A sound like a hiss came from his lips, and his right hand made a swift movement.

Tim, in that half second, knew what he was up against. He didn't reach for his own gun; he didn't ask questions. The small billy that had slipped into his right fist moved in a fast, short arc. The sap caught the car driver close to the ear! He started to slump forward without sound.

Tim quickly caught the man's shoulders, held him from falling on the horn button located in the center of the steering wheel. Tim wanted no sound.

Standing on the running board of the big machine, he eased the unconscious man over to the right and let him slump down on the seat. He noted the position of the man's limp right hand. A second later he located the gun that was tucked beneath the fellow's belt.

There was no doubt in his mind, now. This was a robbery! He

thought of the second man who had disappeared like a wraith into this alleyway, going toward the rear—

He glanced into the rear seat, chanced using his flash for an instant. Cartons of cigarettes were piled back there.

Swiftly Tim Reilly swung down to the alleyway again and hurried ahead into the black gloom at the rear of the building. He reached a high loading platform, deftly swung his lean form up and moved toward the dark rectangular blur of a doorway.

The heavy door was propped open! It was the only entrance—or exit—of the solid-walled building, for off to his left were closed, overhead sliding doors that were held in place by heavy padlocks. Doors of alloy steel that, he knew, were lowered into position each day at the close of business.

He eased through the smaller door, bent down and picked up the brick that had been used to prop it open. The door closed behind him and there was a soft click. His fingers went behind him, and he turned. He traced the door jamb in the vague gloom. There was no way to open that door again, he realized, for there was only the round, half-dollar projection of a cylinder lock.

Somewhere ahead, in one of the floors of this warehouse, Tim realized that he had a man trapped!

He started forward again. His foot touched something. He paused. And he knew that it was going to be impossible to proceed without a light. He could see nothing.

His breath tight in his chest, now, realizing that he was taking a desperate chance, he used his flashlight. And he saw that he was at the end of a long passage that led between high storage shelves that filled the ground floor of the building. Shelves loaded with jugs and bottles of drugs. The cigarettes, then, must be located somewhere else.

He flicked off the light, put it back in his pocket. Then, carefully, using one outstretched hand as a guide, he moved down the length of the narrow aisle. He had his own Police Positive in his fist, now, the gun taken from the car driver in his pocket. His ears were sharp for any sound.

It seemed eternity until he bumped into something ahead. That would be the end of the passage. He chanced the light again. He thought he heard—

It was someone moving, above his head on another floor!

Still using the light, he saw that a cross passage led toward a freight elevator. He quickly reached the spot, noted that a stairway followed the elevator shaftway above. Putting away the flashlight again, Tim started silently up the stairs. He heard the distinct sounds—someone walking across wooden flooring, coming *toward* the elevator.

Halfway up the stairs, Tim Reilly crouched down and waited. He saw that a dim light was switched on in the overhead of the elevator car. And wire mesh was all that shielded Tim from that cab should it descend in the hatchway. If the elevator started—

But it didn't.

A carton was dumped on the elevator platform; then the unseen prowler was returning for another. Tim hurriedly went up the stairs, saw a man's figure just disappearing around a large packing case a hundred feet ahead of him. There was a wide aisle that led that way.

The other man appeared, carrying a carton, almost directly in Tim Reilly's path. He let out a yell,

dropped the package, and went to his knee. A gun was instantly in his fist, and it blasted with a roar in the confines of the loft space!

Tim was in a crouch, now, unprotected, a perfect target. But there was no other way, no place of concealment. His own shot matched the gunman's. Both were too fast, too sudden. Lead screamed into brick walls.

Like a frightened rabbit, the man leaped behind the safety of other packing cases that formed the aisleway. A second man cursed. There were running steps. That must be the one who had left the elevator.

And then there was silence, heavy, ominous.

Tim leaped across the open space, gained the security of the protecting packing cases and edged silently forward. No movement reached his ears. He glanced over his shoulder to watch the stairway, somewhere behind him now. They would try to make a break for it; the two gunmen would try to reach those stairs.

But neither did!

Grimly, the gun steady in his capable fist, young Tim Reilly stalked slowly forward. He was thinking of his father and of the times *he* must have stalked killers like this. For this was the first experience Tim had ever had running up against dangerous men who moved in the dark night. It was the first time he had ever been in a gun fight. He wondered—

Too late, he caught the whisper of movement above him, from atop the piled cases beside which he moved. A form hurtled down!

Tim was carried to the floor. He rolled, gained his feet, was just able to make out the form outlined by the vague light from the elevator cage beyond. He fired even as a gun seemed to smash before his very eyes!

There was a cry of pain and his attacker went down, kicking madly at the hard floor. A gun dropped from lifeless fingers.

Behind Tim, a man snarled! He whirled.

The shot caught Tim in the arm, spun him half around. He lost his balance and stood swaying, trying desperately to level his gun again. But his right arm had been hit. A cold, tingling sensation streaked up and down his forearm, and his fingers seemed nerveless. His arm would not come up. He had backed swiftly toward the elevator, where there was more light, where he could see something.

And the killer leaped after him, the snarl still coming from his lips, another shot crashing out! It barely missed Tim.

And then, suddenly, the man was revealed there in the light. His face, pale, thin, evil. And his eyes—

His eyes!

For just one scant instant, Tim Reilly was held rigid. One of the man's eyes stared balefully, unblinking. It reflected the light in a weird manner.

It was glass!

Both men fired—cop and killer. Both men found their marks! The killer went down with one shattered leg. Tim Reilly felt hot lead bore through his side. His eyes were blearing suddenly, and he was fighting off the terrible drowsiness that tried to engulf him. He was on his knees, swaying, and the killer was only a few yards away, facing him in almost similar manner.

But it was the killer who managed to get his gun up first. A leer touched his harsh features. He

snarled: "And, now, copper, right through the heart!"

Tim thought: *"You've got to kill him! You've got to kill him!"* It was this that kept him conscious, and his arm tried to raise the leaden weight in his hand once again.

But at the same time, he knew that he was doomed! His arm refused to come up, and the killer was crouched there gloating, taking a fiendish delight in watching a cop die. He was delaying death just a moment longer.

And then, as he hung there on his knees helplessly, Tim seemed to hear the voice. He suddenly remembered his father, and the way his father would have carried on in a situation like this. He had been a real cop.

"You can't die—yet, son!" the voice seemed to say.

This time, Tim Reilly got his right arm up. He fired! There was no feeling and no pain and no weight in his arm, now. He fired and saw the killer fire at the same instant. Even as he himself was knocked backward, Tim saw the killer sprawl on his face. A slug ricocheted off metal somewhere and screamed to Tim's left. He swayed to his feet.

His jaw grim, he saw the killer lying there. And he noted the packing cases, and farther along the aisle was the other man—dead.

Strangely, he, himself, was still alive. Tim had felt the distinct force of the slug from the killer's gun—and yet he was not dead! His blurred thoughts recalled the sound of that ricocheting bullet. He stared down at his uniform coat.

His police shield was one for which an additional price had been paid. It was gold-filled and was almost a quarter of an inch thick in the round center where the seal of the State of New York appeared. The heavy, raised section was about the size of a quarter.

It was here that the killer's slug had struck, veering off to ricochet across the storeroom. It was the shield that had stopped a direct shot to his heart.

As he unpinned the shield, Tim Reilly was aware of the police sirens wailing somewhere outside. Perhaps they had heard the shots, or found the man in the waiting car. Or headquarters might even have checked up on his missing call-in. Soon they would be breaking into the building. They would be up here complimenting him on his first real job.

He thought perhaps that he would tell them that he really had not been brave. There had been this premonition all evening that he was going to get the man who had killed his father. And, in a way, it was his father who had really helped him.

For it was his father's former police shield that he had been wearing.

THE END.

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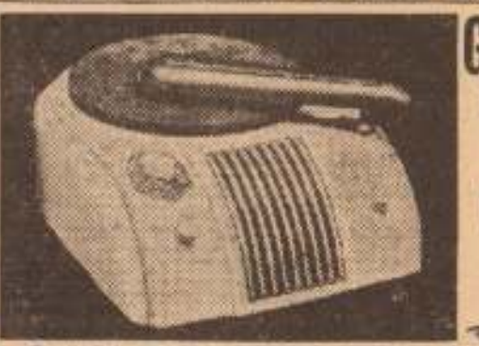

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DIAMONDS OF DEATH

By H. M. Walsh

A sixth sense warned Tommy Blane of impending danger as he strode toward the corner of Market and Franklin Streets. A thick, dank fog rolled in from the river, muffling the strident hoot of boat whistles—filling the night with eerie menace.

Suddenly, a shot crashed the ominous silence of the water front! Tommy Blane yanked the Police Positive from his shoulder; raced up the street. His keen eyes sought the black shadows of the flanking buildings. He could see no one. Rounding a corner, he pulled up short at the sight of a crumpled figure on the wet sidewalk.

His flashlight was of little use in the dense fog, and he bent over the inert form. Blood matted the thick, blond hair; the reek of gore stung Tommy Blane's nostrils. He turned the figure over.

It was Jerry Sims! Jerry Sims—his best friend.

Jerry Sims was dead!

Tommy started to examine the dead man. Then he stiffened! Footsteps pounded toward the corner—fast. It might be someone attracted by the shot. It might be the killer!

Hurriedly, Tommy searched Jerry further. In his stiffening fist, he found something—a diamond ring! The footsteps were louder, now—nearing the corner. Tommy Blane started from his crouch, headed for the shadow of a doorway.

He didn't make it!

"Hold it!" The voice was hard, cold. "Drop that rod and turn around!"

Tommy Blane dropped the ring in his side pocket; his Positive clattered to the pavement. He turned slowly, then a breath broke audibly through his tight lips.

"It's Jerry Sims, sergeant," he said. "Murdered!"

Recognition and surprise crossed Sergeant Casey's lined face, then clouded with hate. Every cop on the force knew the prominent Jerry Sims; knew him as Tommy Blane's friend; knew him for the tips he had given the police through his wide social connections.

Blane said: "Turn in the alarm, sarge. I'll report to headquarters, later." He shucked his gun. "I have something to do first."

He turned up the street. His thoughts spun madly. He had been as close to Jerry Sims as a brother, even though they traveled in widely different circles. Jerry had been bringing Tommy Blane information on a racket that had caught some of the city's leading names in its web. Tommy Blane felt that the diamond ring he had found in Jerry Sim's hand tied in with the racket—with the mystic, Josef.

Looking at the ring, again, Tommy Blane decided to pay a call on Josef—and *now!*

Fifty paces from where Jerry lay, Tommy rang the bell of an old brownstone house. No answer. But he was getting in that house tonight. He banged on the heavy panel with his gun butt. Then the door was thrown open in his face.

A swarthy servant stood in the

He launched his shoulder into Josef's midsection. The gun roared in his ear.

darkness of the threshold, his black, beady eyes gleaming with a malice that was intensified by his snarling voice.

"What do you want?" he snapped.

"I want to see Josef," Blane said. "And fast!"

"He is not here. I, Nijan, am here alone."

The servant's only interest seemed to be to get that door closed—with Tommy Blane on the outside.

"I'll wait," Blane said. He took a step inside.

Nijan slammed the door in Tommy's face. Rather, what might have been his face, had he not been expecting the move. Blane met the door with his shoulder and spun inside. Nijan's hand darted inside his jacket; then a knife gleamed dully, menacingly, in his hand. He charged at Blane. That was his mistake. Blane dropped to a low crouch, at the same time moving forward. The blade slashed over his shoulder, ripping his coat, slicing his flesh!

Blane's right hand palmed his gun. His left snaked up and grabbed Nijan's wrist, and with almost a follow-through motion, he brought up his right. The gun butt crashed against the servant's dark jaw. Nijan staggeded backward, then crumpled to the floor.

Tommy Blane raced down the long hall, through a doorway at the far end. Inside, he was amazed to see a séance being held. Josef, in full regalia—turban, beard and flowing robes—held sway. Tommy looked at the walls, covered with heavy, dark velvet drapes. This was a soundproof room; the reason none of the people had heard the fight he had had getting into the house.

As yet, he had not been noticed by the gathering there. Tommy glanced over the room, cautious to make no noise. He noticed a small table in the center of the room and, on it, a shallow dull-black bowl. A small, brilliant light over the bowl was the only one in the room. Tommy Blane's breath whistled through his teeth. From the bowl, the glitter of precious jewelry—diamond rings, costly brooches, jeweled earrings—dazzled his eyes.

Suddenly, he knew the answer to Josef's racket. The phony mystic had his clients put their valuables in the black bowl; then, when they were under his hypnotic spell, he would take away their jewelry. The bowl probably had a false bottom.

Tommy Blane had no doubt that the ring in his own pocket was one that Jerry Sims had stolen from Josef for evidence. No more doubt, in fact, than he had that Josef had stilled Jerry Sims with a chunk of lead because the young socialite knew too much.

Just then, Tommy heard the low wail of a police siren. Quickly but softly, he edged out the door into the hall. He had not covered the distance down the long foyer before a squad, behind Sergeant Casey and Captain Graham, had battered down the front door. Casey had seen him disappear into the brownstone and not return, Tommy reflected; so he had collected a squad and come in here after him.

Inside the séance room, the place had become a bedlam. People were screaming and pushing each other all over the place. Josef, still calm, came forward, an evil smile on his swart face.

"What do you wish, gentlemen?" he asked icily. "And what is the meaning of breaking into my house?"

Tommy Blane whirled toward the detective captain, standing beside Sergeant Casey, said: "I've got the answer, chief. This guy"—he nodded toward Josef—"is a fake. He gets these people to put valuable pieces of jewelry into that black bowl. It has hinged sides, a false bottom or something, and they never see them again—"

The satanic smile never left Josef's face. "Look at this bowl if you wish." He picked it up and thrust it under Tommy Blane's nose.

Blane took it in his hands, looked at it thoroughly, tapped it repeatedly. Cold sweat pebbled his forehead—

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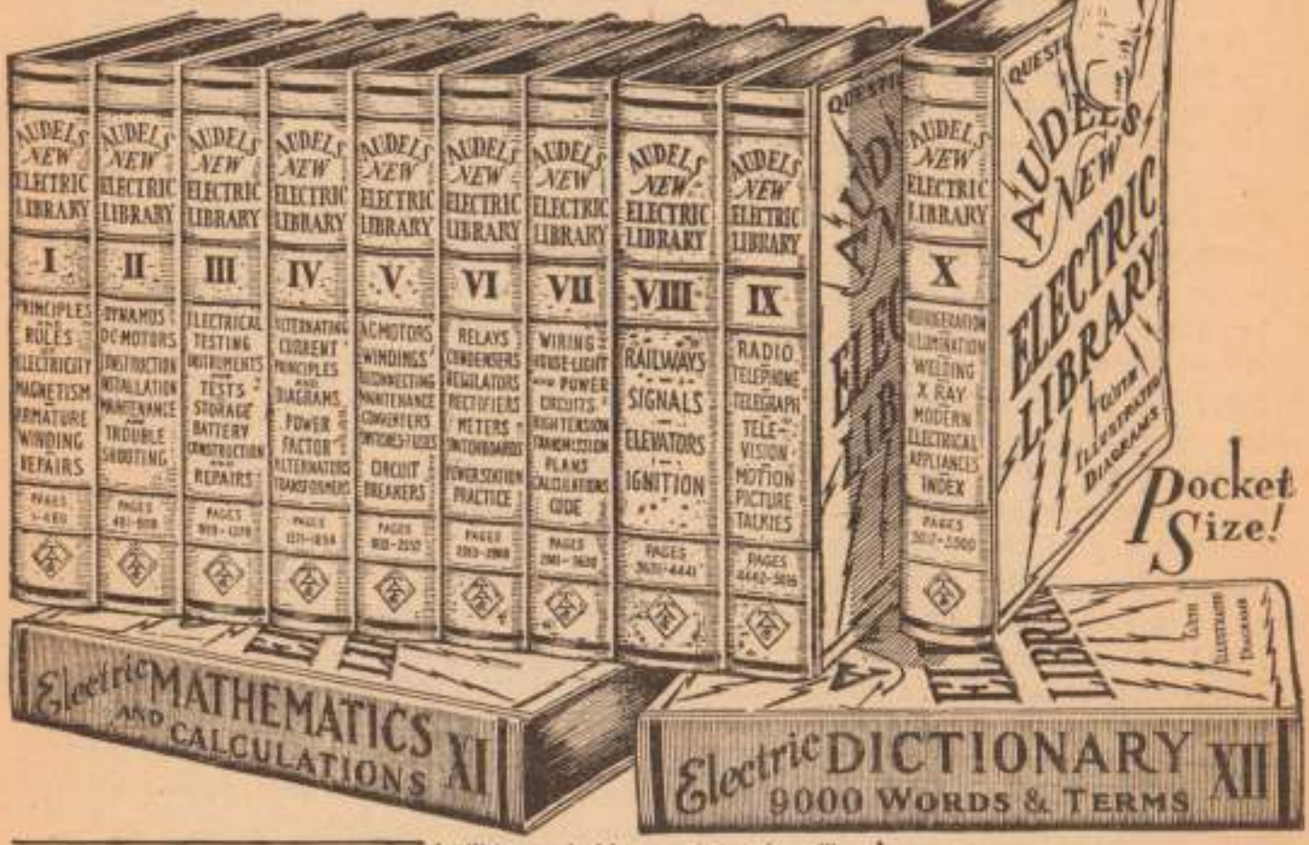

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For the bowl was just that—no spring compartment was visible; no false bottom.

Captain Graham was looking at him querulously. A blunder like this might mean the release of both the detective captain and Tommy from their posts. For Josef was influential among the politically powerful, and there were also some very prominent people among the guests in the room.

But Blane's sixth sense was working again. He sensed that there was still something he had missed. Where had Nijan gone? And why had the servant been so intent on keeping him from the house? Blane knew that there was something definitely wrong with the setup.

An idea forced its way through his maze of thoughts. He stooped down, ostensibly to retie his shoelace. He glanced up at Josef, standing close to the small table.

Suddenly Tommy sprang to his feet, almost knocking the mystic to the floor. "Chief," he exclaimed, "chief, I've got it. Look!" And he pointed to the brilliant overhanging light. "This is no ordinary socket. Look at that lens. It's not an electric-light bulb at all, but a powerful photographic lense—like the one we have down in the lab. You know—the one that takes minute-detail pictures. It shows up every peculiarity of an object in bold outline."

The captain stepped up to the lens. "But what could he use it for?" he said perplexedly. Then: "Come on, Tommy. You're barking up the wrong tree—"

"But, chief, don't you see? Josef doesn't need a trick bowl. His clients put their valuables into that bowl, and the jewelry shows up well against the photographic background of the black glass. His concealed camera—behind that strong lense—takes a picture. Then the next time those same clients come, he has an exact imitation ready. He has them put their jewelry in the bowl a second time; he creates some diversion to take their eyes off the bowl for a few minutes; then—*presto*—they have the imitations and he has the originals—"

A shuffle in the hall clipped Tommy Blane's words. A shot blasted through the curtains! Another—the slugs chewed into the floor near Tommy. He danced toward the small table. The place was suddenly a shambles. The guests were running around seeking cover from the wild slugs. The captain and his men blasted the curtains along the wall—not knowing where to shoot; where the killers were. Tommy made a dive for the photographic lens on the "light socket."

And so did Josef. The murderous mystic pulled a gun from beneath his flowing robes, raised it slowly, menacingly, at Tommy Blane, as if the dick were the only man in the room. A tight sneer turned his lips. An icy chill prickled Tommy's spine; that sneer erased it. He wondered why the killer didn't shoot; when was he going to feel that slug tear through his stomach? But he wasn't going to give that phony all the breaks. He thought of Jerry Sims. Jerry had got it in the back of the head. He knew he'd get it in the belly! But he'd pay off for Jerry first!

He spun on his heels, launched his shoulder into Josef's midsection. The gun roared in his ear; flame lanced through his side. His chest seemed to be bathed in wet, sticky blood.

But he wasn't dead—not yet! He fell against Josef; heard the mystic's savage curse in his ears. It snapped the cloud from his mind. His fist

smashed up, slammed against Josef's mouth. He crossed with another. The gun crashed again; but Josef was staggering off balance. The slug tore through Tommy's coat, creased his arm. He went over on top of the killer, grasped Josef's head with both hands. He slammed it against the floor—again. He heard shots, far down the hall. With a savage smash to the mystic's swollen face, he rose to his feet. Josef would keep for a while.

He stumbled uncertainly, shook his head to clear it of rushing blood. No one was in the room save the guests, huddled in the corners, their faces livid with terror. Tommy remembered the gun at his shoulder. He hadn't had time to think of it until now. He pulled it and held the muzzle against the cord of the overhanging light—the camera. The first slug tore the socket loose. He jammed it into his pocket; started into the hall.

The police had followed the battle to the head of a flight of stairs, leading to the cellar.

"Feed them tear gas!" Captain Graham was saying. "Let's get them alive."

A fresh barrage of bullets poured up the stairs from the cellar at the detective captain's words.

Tommy heard a raucous laugh break the staccato gunfire. He wondered at that. The killers were cornered down there.

And they were laughing!

One of the cops crawled along the floor to the cellar door, a heavy tear-gas gun in his hands. He poked the muzzle down the stairs, fired the bomb.

With the dull *plop* of the projectile on the hard floor of the cellar, a loud, steady whirring sound came up the stairs.

And that laugh again!

Then Tommy realized the reason for that laugh—the *whir*. The gang had refraction fans in the cellar which diffused the gas, so that it did no more harm than cause a stinging sensation in the throat.

Quickly, Tommy signaled four cops from the squad. "Outside," he told them, his voice low. "Shoot through the cellar windows." The policemen moved toward the front door. "And make it look as if there are a dozen of you."

Lead blasted up the stairway again. And Tommy held up his hand for the men left in the hall to hold their fire. The shots from the cellar became less frequent—almost hesitant. Still the police on the upper floor did not fire.

Then the sudden silence was shattered by the crash of bullets from outside, through the cellar windows. The firing was steady, heavy. Tommy, himself, wondered if he had only sent four men.

Here and there, Tommy made out a word over the gunfire: "The cops —outside—the windows. Let 'em have it—fast—"

Tommy Blane's tactics did the trick. The gang in the cellar was thrown into a whirl of confusion. Tommy leaped for the stairs. He didn't give his men an order to follow. He didn't have to. They were on his heels.

The killers didn't know which way to shoot. They were hemmed in on all sides. One went for the light switch. He never made it. Tommy Blane's slug dropped him without his knowing whether the lights were on or not. They were off for him!

Two of the gunmen huddled near the stairs, behind the protection of a barrel, taking pot shots at the windows. They turned as they heard Tommy and the others piling down the stairs. Their faces masked with

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bewilderment. Then they swung their guns around. But Tommy was off his feet, diving straight down at them from the staircase. He brought up his knees to break his fall, and they smashed into a face that was instantly bathed in blood and pulped flesh. His knees broke his fall and the gunman's head at the same time.

And Tommy Blane didn't stop to observe the damage. He hadn't done enough damage—yet!

In a glance he saw that the second man was Nijan. He remembered the dark servant's attack earlier in the evening. He'd make Nijan remember this one—if he lived. Tommy slashed out with his gun barrel, and Nijan covered with his hands the place where his jawbone had been. Tommy was weakening. But he didn't know it. The bedlam around him was a steady thunder; everything before him was a fiery-red curtain. Nijan was groveling before him—begging— It surged the hate in Tommy Blane's blood. He swiped the servant across the temple again!

He was still fighting when he felt hands slide under his arms, pulling him off the dark-skinned killer. He didn't know exactly what was happening. He only knew that he wanted to fight—to keep on fighting. To avenge Jerry Sim's murder.

Slowly his head began to clear. He tried to climb to his feet. His body was a fury of pain; his mind a vortex of wild, confused thoughts. He stared out through the mist at Captain Graham.

"It's all over, Tommy," the detective captain was saying. "And it's your show. Look what we found for you."

Sergeant Casey led him across the room. The sight cleared his dazed mind, for now he knew that his surmise had been entirely correct. There was a wonderfully equipped photographic workshop, as well as

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Most of the stuff lying on the benches was the McCoy, waiting for a fence to dispose of it. Josef—with his gang—had cornered the market on as nice and profitable a racket as had ever been born.

At the thought, Tommy turned to his chief.

"Josef . . . upstairs. He might get—"

"Get away?" the captain finished. "No, Tommy. I left one of the boys to play nurse up there when you started down the stairs. In fact he's right over there, Tommy. Take a look at your handiwork. You did a nice job on him."

Tommy's eyes swept over to where a cop was holding Josef. His face was a bloody pulp; he was beaten—and knew it. But that didn't erase the curl from his thin lips; the viciousness from his beady, black eyes.

Tommy Blane met Josef's satanic smile—just as coldly. He said: "You'll have plenty of time for séances where you're going. Perhaps your mystic powers can tell you what you'll look like when you get out— If we can't plant you in the chair on a murder rap."

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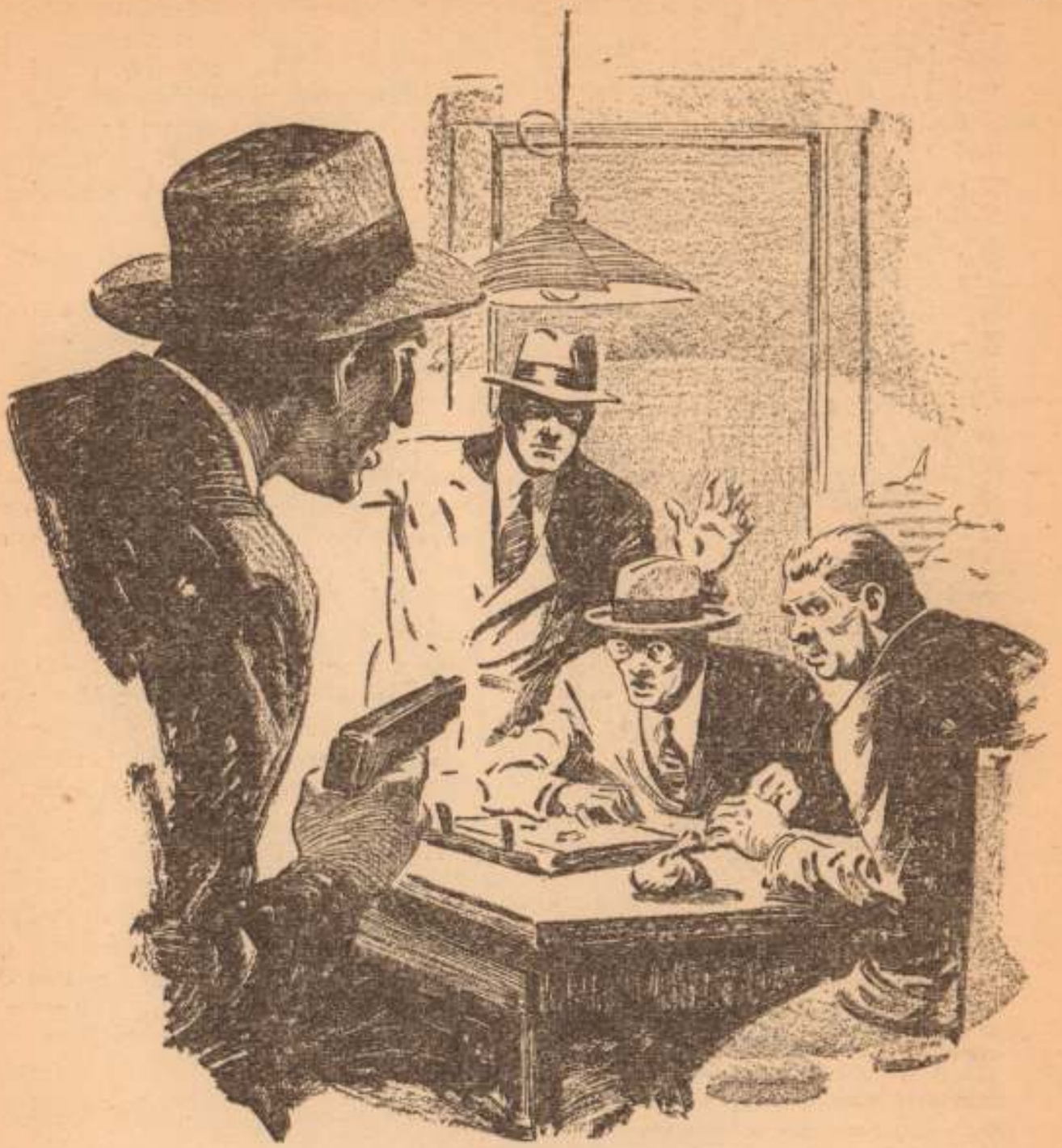

SWITCH TO KILL

By Robert C. Blackmon

Jackson Cole was uneasy.

Light from the street lamp came through the windshield as he swung the coupé over to the curb and stopped. His wide-set brown eyes narrowed and the wrinkles in his forehead deepened pensively as he looked down at the man in the seat beside him.

"I don't like the feel of this job, tonight, Mandel," he said, and there was an uncertain note in his deep voice.

Curtis Mandel's pale-blue eyes

blinked indifferently behind thick glasses. His slight figure was stiffly erect and his blue-veined fingers worried the black brief case that rested on the knife-creased thighs of his light-gray trousers. He said: "This affair tonight is, to me, but another routine job in twenty years of diamond buying. Your position in my transaction with Mr. Vogel is as a witness only, and as a guard after the gems have come into my possession. Is that clear?"

"Yeah, I guess so," Cole said tightly. Mandel's confident tone didn't make him feel less apprehensive. But, after all, he thought, the diamond buyer was a client, and he needed the fee.

Kicking the left door open, Cole got out. Lanky legs carried him around the car. He was scowling as he stepped up to the sidewalk.

The coupé was the only vehicle on the street. Light from the street lamp glinted on dark store windows. There were no lighted signs, and all of the buildings lining the street were very old. None of them reached higher than three floors.

The building before which the coupé had stopped had one upper floor above three narrow stores. "For Rent" signs plastered the windows of two of the stores. The window of the third store was filled with a brave display of cheap clothing. There was a dark stairway door to the right of the occupied store. Upstairs, light struck through a cracked window shade. It was the only lighted window that Cole saw.

He grunted sourly and turned back to the coupé, at the same time checking the presence of the heavy automatic in a shoulder holster under his left arm.

"O. K., Mandel," he said flatly, trying to keep the anger from his voice. "This is the place."

Mandel left the coupé. Fussily, he smoothed his clothing and adjusted the gray felt on his little head. Clutching the brief case against his left side, he crossed the sidewalk to Cole. There was a mincing quickness in his walk.

Cole turned and strode to the stairway door. Grit crunched beneath his feet as he crossed the little entry and mounted the narrow, dark flight. Curtis Mandel was at his heels.

The second-floor hallway was very short. It was lighted only by yellow light, spilling from the open doorway of a room near the stairhead.

A man's short, broad outline showed against the light.

"*Ach*, Mr. Mandel!"

The short man's voice was thick and guttural. He turned a little, and light from the room behind him struck across his face. Cole saw small, round blue eyes above a fat bulb of a nose and a thick blond brush mustache. The man wore a dark-blue serge suit that was loose on his fat body. He reminded Cole of a barkeeper.

"This is Cole, a private detective, Vogel." Mandel pushed past Cole and shook hands with Vogel. The brief case was under his left arm. His voice was high and shrill. "A merely routine precaution, I assure you. His presence does not reflect upon your integrity in any way, of course. Now, those gems—"

"*Ach*, right to business we go, eh?"

Vogel's little eyes flicked away from Cole's lanky height and he drywashed fat hands before his thick middle.

"Dot is goot. We do business right away, quick. On time you are, to the minute. Ten o'clock it is, already. Come."

Turning, he went back into the lighted room. He moved with a sur-

prising lightness for his apparent weight. Mandel minced into the room after him. Cole followed, scowling. He closed the door behind him.

The room was large and square and scantily furnished. A single droplight in the center gave a yellowish, glaring light. The room had but the one window, and its shade was drawn to the sill. There were no curtains. A chipped white iron bed was in the far corner to the right of the door, its dingy covers rumpled. Two chairs at a small table in the center of the room and a mirrored bureau against the left wall completed the furnishings. There was no rug. The bare walls were water-stained and dingy.

Mandel minced to the table and took one of the chairs, putting the brief case on the table. He was facing the closed door.

Cole stalked across the gritty floor and stood beside Mandel, scowling.

Vogel took the other chair and rested his elbows on the table edge. His eyes were very bright.

"You haff the money?" he asked softly.

"Yes." Mandel licked at thin lips. Both of his hands were on the brief case. "I have fifteen thousand dollars in currency, as we agreed. Now, the gems—"

"They are here."

Vogel's right arm made a quick movement and a small chamois bag dropped to the table top. It was closed with a drawstring.

Hans Vogel's fat hands could move much more lightly and swiftly than his big body.

Mandel's thin fingers opened the chamois bag, and drops of liquid fire seemed to flow out on the table top. Half a handful of bright, faceted

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gems flung back the light from the overhead bulb in flaming yellows and reds and blues. All of the gems were diamonds, unset.

Cole drew in a slow breath between his teeth. If those stones were real—

"These diamonds come from Amsterdam, Holland, as I haff told you before." Vogel spoke softly, wearily. "I am in Amsterdam before the war comes. I think Amsterdam will fall. My gems I get together and leave for America before things happen. I lose everything else—everything. For that, I haff to sell, quick, for fifteen thousand dollars, cash. Twenty-five thousand dollars they are worth—maybe more. I am selling them to you, mine goot friend, Mandel, for fifteen thousand dollars—cash. The money I must haff quick. That is goot, no?"

"Yes! Yes! I'll take the entire lot!" Mandel's voice was shrill with excitement. He reached for the brief case. "I'll—"

"You'd better take a mighty good look at the stones before you pay, Mandel," Cole said flatly. "I'm not saying Vogel is trying anything crooked, but—"

Mandel cocked his little head back and glared up at Cole, who stood beside him. His hat was still on his head. His pale eyes blazed behind his thick glasses.

"I am thoroughly capable to judge the worth of the stones at a glance, Mr. Cole," he said bitingly. "I could determine the value of any individual stone, or the entire collection, within a moment. These stones, for your information, are entirely genuine and are worth . . . ah . . . fifteen thousand dollars!"

Mandel coughed and turned back to the brief case. His thin fingers fussed with the straps.

"Kindly disregard Mr. Cole's comments, Vogel," he said. "He is merely a guard I employed for the

evening. He has no knowledge whatsoever of gems."

Cole's lanky figure stiffened. Long fingers fisted at his sides. He choked off the angry words pushing to his lips. Muscles knotted at the angle of his jaw. The impulse to tell Mandel what he could do with the bodyguarding job for the evening was almost overpowering, but he managed to keep silent. He needed the twenty-five-dollar fee.

"Mr. Cole is forgiffen," Vogel said softly. His little eyes flicked up at Cole. "We diamond men understand."

His fat shoulders lifted slightly. His little eyes were very, very bright, as he watched Mandel take packets of bank notes from the brief case.

"Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen thousand. I think you will find the amount entirely correct, Vogel."

Mandel stacked the bills.

"Yess. Now, the gems."

Vogel scooped the flashing gems up in a fat hand. Holding the chamois bag, he let the stones dribble into the bag, a stream of bright, liquid fire.

"Wass it not for the war," he said huskily as he pulled the drawstring tight, "those gems I would not sell for that price. I—"

He stopped talking abruptly.

Cole heard a thin, creaking sound. It jerked his eyes up to the room door.

The door, he saw, was open about a foot. Through the narrow slot, he saw a man's pale, bony face and hand. The hand held a heavy revolver. The barrel of the weapon was trained on the group about the table.

Cole grunted. His lean face went expressionless. His right hand started up, streaking for the gun under his left arm. At the same time he started to the left and away from the table, to put Mandel and Vogel out of the line of fire.

Then Curtis Mandel screamed shrilly and jerked to his feet. His blue-veined fingers clawed frantically at Cole, gripping his right forearm and throwing him entirely off balance. Before Cole could fling him aside and get his gun out, the bony-faced man had stepped into the room and closed the door.

"Nix on the heater, chum," he said nasally, wagging his gun at Cole. "Behave."

Cole raised his hands shoulder high. His face was still without expression, but his brown eyes were burning.

"O. K., Vogel, you louse, get over with him and the little squirt." The bony-faced man wagged his gun at Vogel, still sitting at the table. "You thought I couldn't find you, eh? Think again, you fat slob. Any time Vic Santin lets a fat punk like you pull a switch on—"

Mandel screamed again, stark terror filling his high voice.

"Cole!" he shrieked. "Do something! He'll rob me—kill me!"

Mandel's hands were thrust far above his head. His hat was on the floor. His slight figure was shaking.

"Pipe down, squirt!"

Vic Santin looked at Mandel, dark eyes gleaming beneath thick, black brows. The gun covered Mandel.

Then Vogel started up from the table and moved toward Cole. He took one step, and two quick, whip-like reports sounded in the room!

Cole saw two small dark holes appear suddenly just above the bridge of Santin's sharp nose. The bony-faced man's eyes went glassy; his mouth dropped open, baring small, yellowish teeth. His bony fingers

opened stiffly and the gun fell from his hand. Thin legs folded abruptly beneath him and he fell forward, crashing to the floor on his face. He did not move after he struck. A little trickle of blood came out from under his head and crawled over the bare boards of the floor!

"G-good heavens!"

Mandel made a gagging sound and clutched at the table. His face was greenish, his pale eyes bulging behind the thick glasses. He seemed to be unable to keep his eyes from the body on the floor.

Cole's right hand jumped instinctively for his left coat lapel.

"Dot iss not necessary, now, mine friend," Vogel said quickly.

Cole saw a small, black gun in his right hand. The weapon wasn't as large as a cigarette package. Vogel's fat fingers all but concealed it.

"Just a little shooter I brought from Holland with me, Mr. Cole." Vogel's brush mustache moved as he smiled. "Thiss robber gets what iss coming to him, no? It iss to shoot him, or he will shoot you or Mr. Mandel. That is right, no?"

Vogel made a quick movement with his right hand and the little gun was gone.

"Yeah. I guess that's right."

Cole was frowning. He kept his right hand near his left coat lapel. There were little crow's-feet at the corners of his eyes. He had not seen the fat Dutchman draw the tiny gun. He had not seen the gun replaced. Vogel apparently carried the little weapon in some sort of sleeve rig. Cole's frown deepened.

"Cole!" Mandel still clutched the table edge. His slight figure was swaying, jerking. His face was greenish white. "Cole, he gulped. "I . . . I'm sick. I . . . I've got to get—"

Cole scooped Mandel's hat from the floor with his left hand and jammed it on the little diamond buyer's head. Still using his left hand, he shoved the packets of money back into the brief case. His right hand was touching the butt of the automatic under his left arm, and his brown eyes watched Vogel.

"Come on, Mandel. Move!" He pushed the brief case into Mandel's shaking hands. "Get to the car. I'll come behind you. Vogel, stand where you are. If you try to—"

"But the diamonds!" Vogel raised both fat hands. "Mr. Mandel! The diamonds. Thiss robber iss nothing. No one could hear the little gun shoot. I am taking all responsibility for the robber. You and Mr. Cole will haff nothing to worry about. You buy the diamonds, Mr. Mandel. I take the money. You and Mr. Cole go away and forget everything. I am taking care of everything. Mr. Mandel, you will never get a chance like this again—thirty thousand dollars' worth of diamonds for fifteen thousand dollars. Only because I need the money quick, I am selling them to you. I—"

Mandel shuddered.

"Cole," he said jerkily, "I . . . I can't let a chance like that pass."

Mandel went back to the table, started pulling the money packets from the brief case. Vogel moved to face him across the table. The small chamois bag was on the table top, its drawstring pulled tight.

Cole moved to Mandel's left, his right hand still raised to his left coat lapel, the long fingers touching the butt of the heavy automatic. He was scowling.

"Mandel," he said flatly, "take my advice and let the diamonds go. This is murder, man. Getting mixed up in—"

"Fifteen thousand dollars, Vogel."

Mandel was panting as he stacked the money packets and pushed them across the table toward Vogel. "Now, I'll take the gems and get away from here before—" He reached for the chamois bag. Smiling, Vogel reached for the stack of bills.

"Hold it, Mandel!" Cole drew his gun, held it in his hand, not aimed at anything in particular. "Vogel, keep your hands off that money for a minute. Mandel, open that bag and check those diamonds. My advice is to get out of here quick, carrying your dough with you and leaving the stones. But if you're set on buying the stuff, check everything before you pay. Make it snappy."

"Mr. Cole is believing I am a crook?"

Vogel's fat hands stopped, poised over the stack of bank notes. His little eyes met Cole's. They were very cold and hard, though Vogel was smiling.

"Being careful, Vogel, is just a habit with me." Cole moved the automatic to point in Vogel's direction, without actually aiming the weapon. "Hurry, Mandel; check the diamonds."

"But . . . but I saw Vogel put the diamonds—" Mandel gulped. He shuddered again. His thin fingers fussed with the drawstring of the chamois bag. "I . . . I've got to get away from here," he whimpered. "I can't be involved in—" He got the bag open, spilled a few of the gems into his hand. "Good heavens!"

Cole saw Vogel's eyes flicker, saw the stiffening of his fat shoulders, his thick fingers.

"*These* gems are imitations!" Mandel said shrilly and jerked up from the table. His chair went over with a crash. Off balance, he pawed at Cole, and his slight figure came between Cole's gun and Vogel.

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Thrusting with his left hand, Cole tried to push him away. He stopped, with the movement half completed. He was looking into the tiny black muzzle of the small gun in Vogel's fat right hand.

"Maybe," Vogel said softly, all accent gone from his voice, "you'd like to get what Santin got. If not, drop your gun—quick!"

Cole let breath out slowly between clenched teeth and dropped his gun. It thudded to the floor between him and Mandel.

"Now, Mandel, move to the left and away from Cole. Make it fast, and careful."

Whimpering with fright, Mandel moved. His hands were again far above his head. His thin face was again a greenish white.

"So it's like Santin said before he died, Vogel—if that's your name. It was a switch." Cole spoke slowly. He was frowning. His mind was churning. "You pulled the switch gag on Santin—offering him real diamonds brought out of Holland before the war. The gems you showed him *were* real, as were the gems you showed Mandel. You're plenty fast with your hands, Vogel. You took Santin's money for the gems he thought he was getting at a give-away price. But you switched imitation stones for the diamonds in the chamois bag before you gave it to him. Santin didn't check the stones before he left and you were gone before he realized that he had been gypped."

Cole's lanky figure was tense.

Mandel was to his right, within reach, shaking with terror. Cole could hear the little diamond buyer whimpering. The table was to Cole's left, not four feet away, with the money packets and the chamois bag on it. The few stones Mandel had dropped were scattered over the table top, flashing in the glow of the overhead light. Vogel had stepped away from the table and was about five feet from Cole and Mandel, directly in front of them. The gun Cole had dropped was almost at his feet. Mandel's overturned chair was behind Cole, one leg almost touching his left leg.

"You learned that Mandel bought diamonds, Vogel." Cole talked steadily. Vogel couldn't let either of them live now. The crack of the little gun wasn't loud enough to be heard in the street. Within the next few moments— "You tried to pull the old switch gag on him. Santin was plenty sore about being taken; so he hunted until he found you here. You tried to kill him before he could say enough to warn us that you were working the switch gag. I'd already wondered if you were. Santin lived long enough to say one word that proved that you were gypping Mandel—'switch.'"

"You're smart, Cole, but it won't get you anything, now. Mandel would have fallen for the switch gag, if you hadn't been with him. I knew I was going to have trouble with you when you first showed. Me—I don't like private dicks. They know too much."

The little gun in Vogel's hand was steady. One side of his brush mustache twitched slightly.

"But me—I know plenty, too." The little blue eyes seemed to become harder and colder. "Maybe my name isn't Vogel, but it's as good as any other for my work. It was good enough to pull Mandel and Santin in. Santin was too smart for his own good. So are you. I'm going to switch the Santin kill to you and Mandel! The cops will find that you popped Santin with the little gun.

You were using it as a hold-out. There'll be plenty of time to fix that. They'll find that Santin managed to kill both of you before he died. That'll switch killing both of you to Santin. Me—I'll be in the clear. Mandel's fifteen thousand dollars and Santin's eighteen thousand will keep me in coffee and cake until I decide to pull the dumb Dutchman switch gag again."

Vogel laughed shortly.

"O. K. Now, back away from that gun, Cole. Keep moving with him, Mandel. Swing around and back up near the window, facing the door and Santin. Move!" Vogel started edging toward Santin's gun on the floor about six feet away. "I'll tell you when to stop. Maybe I'll stop you, eh?" The mustache moved as Vogel grinned.

Cole's lips tightened. He stepped back, and his foot hit the overturned chair, as he had known that it would. He grunted and managed to sway, as if losing his balance. His right arm came down, as though to keep himself from falling. The right hand touched Mandel's left shoulder, and Cole thrust as hard as he could, shoving Mandel away.

The little diamond buyer stumbled and fell yelling shrilly.

Cole's lanky figure jackknifed, his left hand sweeping down for the nearest leg of the overturned chair. His right hand stabbed for the gun on the floor almost at his feet.

Vogel's little weapon cracked spitefully once and Cole's brown felt tumbled from his head, rolling down his bent back to fall to the floor behind him. Something raked a stinging gash across his left hip. Mandel screamed shrilly.

Cole's left hand struck the leg of the overturned chair and gripped it.

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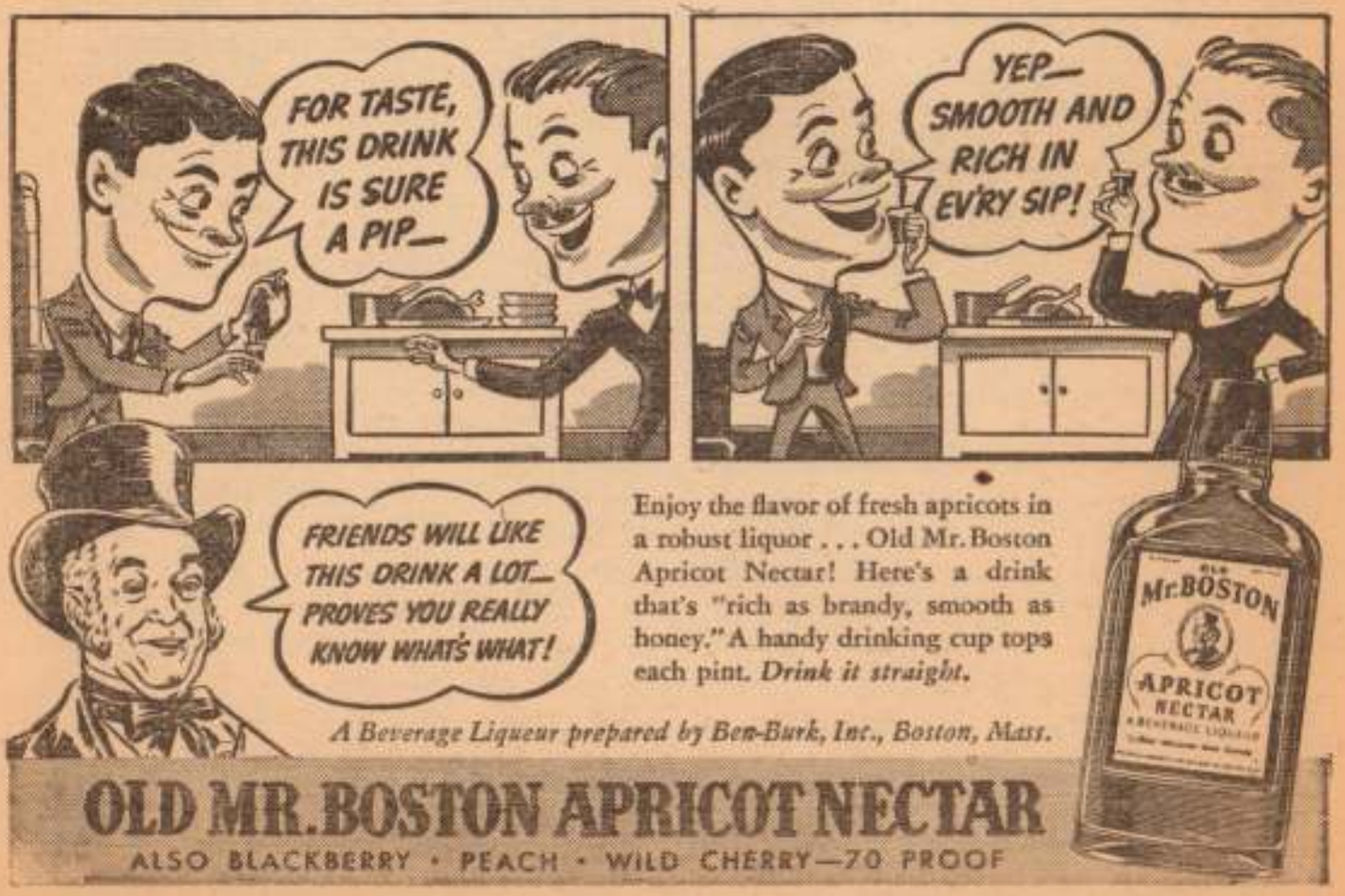

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Jerking the chair forward, he flung it spinning along the floor toward Vogel's fat legs. At the same moment, his right hand found his dropped gun.

Vogel fired again but missed as he tried to avoid the clattering chair. The slug gouged plaster from the water-stained wall behind Cole. The reek of cordite was strong in the air of the room.

Cole's long fingers closed about the butt of the heavy automatic on the floor. He tipped its barrel up toward Vogel's fat figure and fired! The roar of the heavy gun seemed to shake the room. The cracked shade rattled as it beat against the window frame from the concussion of the shot.

Vogel made a quick, strangling sound and went backward two steps on fat, wavering legs. The little gun slid from his opening fingers, but did not fall to the floor. The black elastic cord, holding it to the sleeve rig, kept it dangling a few inches from Vogel's right-sleeve cuff. Both of Vogel's fat hands pawed aimlessly at his chest, and he crumpled to the floor, rolling over on his back. The little gun banged against the floor boards as his arm dropped.

Cole got to his feet slowly, not taking his eyes from Vogel's big hulk. Erect, he went to the man and looked down at him for a moment. He grunted.

Vogel was unconscious, badly wounded, but he was still alive. Vic Santin was dead, of course, with two slugs from Vogel's little gun in his brain.

Scowling, Cole went to the window and ripped the cracked shade aside. Smashing the windowpane with his gun, he aimed the weapon into the air and fired three times. The triple explosion boomed very loudly in the deserted street.

Grunting with satisfaction, he

turned from the window and went to Curtis Mandel. The little diamond buyer was huddled on the floor near the window, his hands over his face. He was making shrill, whimpering sounds. He screamed as Cole touched his back.

"Snap out of it, Mandel," Cole told him wearily. His hip was stinging and he could feel blood on his leg. The wound wasn't very serious, for he could still use the leg. "Everything is all right now. Those shots out of the window should bring the cops along almost any minute. They should have heard the—" He paused as he heard the distant wail of a siren. "They heard, all right."

He caught Mandel's arm and pulled him to his feet. The little diamond buyer was shaking so badly he could hardly stand.

"My money . . . the diamonds . . . Vogel—" He started whimpering incoherently.

"Your money's all right. It's all on the table by the brief case," Cole told him flatly. "Forget the diamonds. The ones in the bag are phony. The others are probably hot. You owe me twenty-five dollars as the regular fee, and I'm collecting enough extra for a new suit. Vogel ruined the pants to this suit. Is that O. K. with you?"

"Yes! Two suits! Anything!" Mandel shrilled. "Good heavens! Talking about a new suit and—"

Mandel stared at Vogel and Santin on the floor and shuddered.

"That's just a routine job with me, Mandel, in ten years as a private detective." Jackson Cole grinned a little. "You hired me as a guard for your person and your money tonight. Your person isn't hurt and your money's safe. Think that over the next time you start out to buy diamonds."

Jackson Cole's grin broadened. The siren was very loud in the street outside.

Vogel's not dead, yet. He may live long enough to talk to the cops and to burn for killing Vic Santin. His game was a switch game, all the way around. He switched phonies for the real ice, then tried to switch Santin's kill to me. We can convince the cops about the diamonds. We don't have to convince them about Santin. The little gun that killed Santin has switched the kill back to Vogel, where it belongs. The little gun's still tied to the rig in Vogel's sleeve. That ought to convince even the cops."

THE END.

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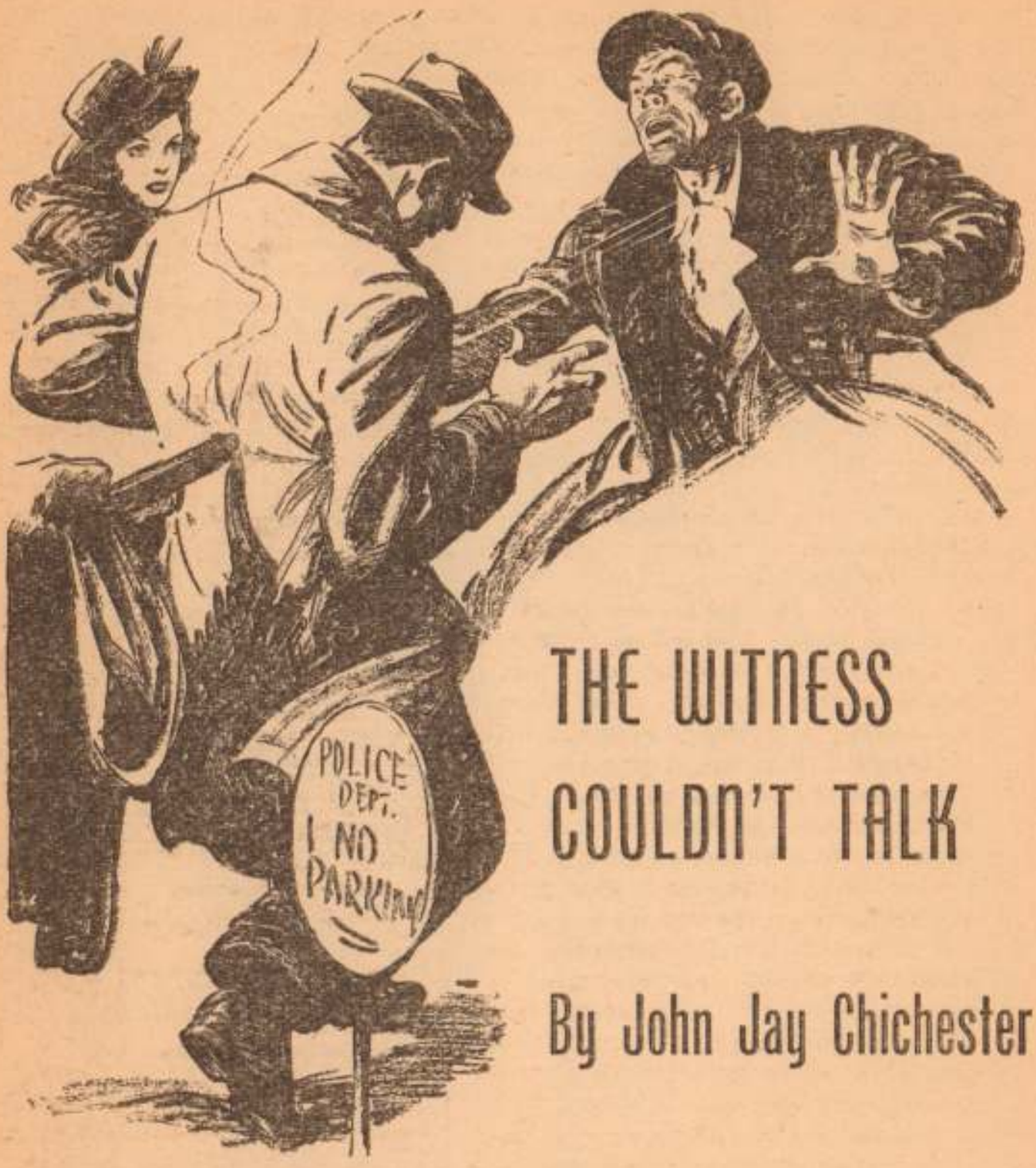


THE WITNESS COULDN'T TALK

By John Jay Chichester

Jimmy Salem was sitting at the bar in Fairchild's when the boy told him he was wanted on the phone. It would be from Nora, he thought; she was supposed to meet him here at one o'clock. She was late.

But the call wasn't from Nora. The voice that came over the wire was cold and menacing! It said:

"Listen, Salem, we're givin' you one more chance. That case you're witness in Tuesday mornin'—you better not be there."

Jimmy Salem had received phone calls like this before, and none of them had frightened him. His temper blazed.

"Lay off, rat!" he shouted. "It's about time you learned you can't bluff me. And get this—I'll be there!"

"O. K., smart guy," the voice cut

in, "have it your way—the hard way." The voice had dropped to a whisper, but was no less menacing. "You've asked for it, and you'll get it—plenty!"

The line went dead. Jimmy slammed the receiver and strode back to the bar, muttering angrily under his breath.

Nora Hill walked in the door as he ordered his second drink. He watched her walk nervously across the room and climb up on the red leather stool beside him. Her radiant smile was missing; her pretty face was pale and her eyes frightened.

"Oh, Dave, I'm sorry I'm late." Her lips trembled, and she grasped the sleeve of his coat. "But . . . you see—" She choked on her words.

"I get it," he said grimly. "Now, it's *you* they're working on. Don't worry, honey. It's all a cheap bluff; an act they're putting on." His lips tightened. "I'm not falling for it!"

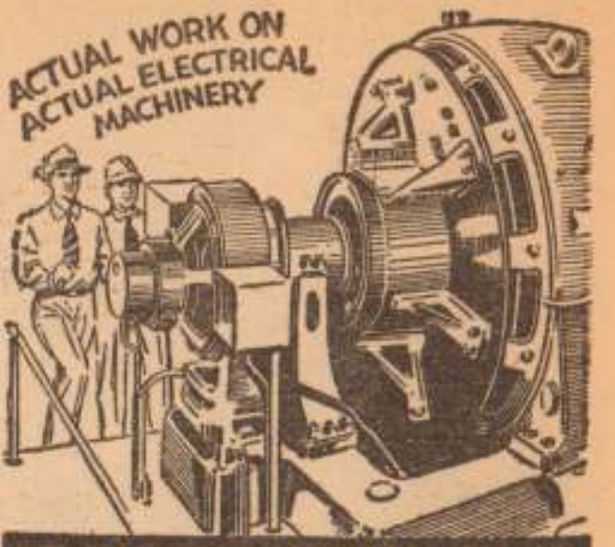
He ordered Nora a cocktail. Her hands trembled so violently that she could hardly hold the glass. She sipped the drink, and the glass clicked against her teeth.

"Jimmy, I . . . I'm scared!" she said. "You . . . you're making a mistake not to be scared, too. They're not going to let you testify, and they know by this time that there's only one way to stop you—to kill you! Oh, Jimmy, is it so terribly important that those men be sent to prison? Is it more important than—our future happiness?"

"It's a matter of principle, of self-respect," Jimmy said stubbornly. "You wouldn't want to marry a coward, would you?"

"I don't call it being a coward when we've got so much at stake. At least, I don't like the idea of being engaged to a dead hero—"

"Now, look, Nora; it's only a cheap bluff. Suppose every witness



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his memory just because he got a few threats. Why, the whole country would go to hell."

Nora sipped her drink. She knew how useless it was to argue, and deep down inside her she was proud of him. But she was frightened.

"Jimmy," she pleaded, "will you promise me something?"

"Sure, Nora; sure." He paused. "That is—"

"Go straight to the district attorney's office and tell them about these threats. They'll protect you. They'll give you a bodyguard."

"I don't like that stuff," Jimmy growled. "It's the same as admitting— Oh, all right; anything to keep you from worrying. I'll get off an hour early and go to the D. A.'s office."

"No!" Nora insisted. "Not later —*now!* The moment we leave this place."

But it was already too late. The woman who had been sitting beside Nora left her drink and rushed out of the bar. She had a hard, cold beauty, known on Broadway, and a hard treachery in her eyes. The police and underworld knew her as Frankie Morgan's moll. A man was waiting for her at the entrance.

"We gotta work fast," she said. Her voice was brittle and husky. "The babe's talked him into going to the D. A. for protection. We gotta stop him before he gets to the subway!"

Detective Lieutenant Danny Rourke didn't hear the shot. The sound was muffled by the noisy confusion of a busy noon-day traffic. A portable gasoline engine, operating the air compressor of a sandblasting machine, which was being used to scour the soiled sandstone face of the building adjoining Fairchild's, added to the din.

He did, however, hear the girl's scream, but thought it was a traffic

accident. *"Somebody's got clipped,"* he thought.

But just then, the traffic lights blinked, and there was a brief pause in the converging stream of vehicles. The portable gasoline engine coughed to an abrupt silence, and Danny Rourke heard the girl's voice, shrill with hysteria, crying:

"Somebody do something! Get a doctor; an ambulance. Can't you see he's been shot? He's dying!"

A gathering crowd was packing solid in front of the building next to Fairchild's. Rourke removed a pair of big hands from the slash pockets of his tan raglan and straight-armed a path through the throng.

There were two men lying on the sidewalk. One was dead! Rourke had seen too many dead men not to know.

The dead man looked like a bum, like so many other bums drifting out of the Bowery and across City Hall Park. His shoes were broken; his coat threadbare, and he needed a shave. A bullet had smashed through his neck and had caught the jugular vein. Things like that aren't very nice to look at.

The other fellow was young; he couldn't have been over twenty-five. He lay in a spreading pool of crimson, stunned and gasping for breath. A red welter oozed through his fingers where he pressed them tightly against his side.

A rain of loose sand sifted down from the swinging platform, where, four floors above the street, workmen were working behind a canvas curtain, grinding off the years of accumulated grime. Danny Rourke's shoes gritted harshly as he strode across the sidewalk and bent down over the wounded man.

"I'm a cop, kid," Rourke said. "Who gunned you?"

The young chap tried to pull himself up on one elbow. He fell back, gasping: "I . . . I didn't think . . . they'd do it. I thought they . . . just bluffing. It happened so quick —" His words stopped; his voice faded into the black gulf of unconsciousness.

Danny Rourke darted a swift glance around the crowd and spotted the pretty girl with the stricken eyes. She wasn't trying to get away. He let her alone for a moment. In the pocket of the young fellow's coat, he found a billfold containing an automobile operator's license. The license told him that the name of the wounded man was James Salem.

Tucked in one corner of the billfold was a thumbnail-size picture; one apparently scissored from a snapshot. The picture was that of the pretty girl who had started crying dry, racking sobs.

A man who claimed to be a doctor offered his services to the dying man. Rourke nodded his consent, got to his feet and grasped the weeping girl's arm. He led her inside the entrance of Fairchild's Restaurant.

"All right, sister," he said grimly, "let's have it. Who gunned 'em?"

The girl tried hard to control her hysteria. "They . . . the gang—" She choked on her tears.

Danny Rourke's eyes narrowed, glittered hard. *"So that's the way it is,"* he thought. *"Gang stuff! The kid doesn't look like a guy who'd be mixed up with a mob; neither does this doll—but you never can tell."*

He said: "Keep right on talking, sister. Begin by giving a name—yours. No phony stuff or it'll be that much tougher for you."

The girl's faltering voice stead-

ied, then quickened into a fast rush of words.

"I . . . I'm Nora Hill. Jimmy and I have been engaged a long time—trying to save enough to be married this June. But you don't want to hear about that.

"A month ago, there was a holdup. Jimmy saw it; he was the only witness who could give the police a description of the criminals. He picked out two of them—from their pictures in the Rogues Gallery."

It sounded straight to Rourke. But the homicide dick had a suspicious nature. He still couldn't be sure about this girl. "Yeah?" he said. "What stick-up was that?"

"The robbery of the Midtown Gold-Buying Service. Jimmy saw it through the windows of the building across the court."

The detective nodded. Since murder hadn't been committed, he hadn't been on the case; but he remembered what had been in the newspapers.

"Sure," he told Nora, "I remember. Smooch Anders and Frankie Morgan are the rats your boy friend put the finger on. They're locked up in the Tombs."

Maybe Nora thought Danny was still skeptical of her story. "Oh, but here were three others in the holdup gang!" she exclaimed quickly. "One of them has been telephoning Jimmy every day. This morning he phoned me, threatening to do"—her eyes went toward the street—"that!" She said: "Tell me the truth; Jimmy is . . . dead?"

"A doc's working on him," Rourke told her. "Doctors don't bother with dead men." He paused a moment and his brow furrowed in thought. "The old guy on the sidewalk," he said, "where does *he* fit in?"

The girl moistened her lips nervously. "I . . . I never saw him before; that is, not before he fell in front of me. He was holding onto his throat, trying to say something. It . . . it all happened so quickly. The shot wasn't very loud—just one small explosion."

"Two," Rourke corrected.

"Only one," insisted the girl.

Danny Rourke heard the ambulance scream up to the curb. He wanted to be out there when the ambulance surgeon took charge. He cut Nora short.

"Maybe you saw a taxi pull away from the curb in a hell of a hurry?"

Nora Hill shook her head. "No, there wasn't any taxi. The shot couldn't have come from a taxi, anyhow; there were too many people around."

"You stay here," Rourke snapped. He made his way back to where the boy lay. He looked down at Jimmy Salem and asked the doctor who had volunteered first aid: "How are the kid's chances, doc?"

"Not so good, lieutenant. A clean wound except for the gunpowder. The bullet passed entirely through him. But the gunpowder"—the doctor shook his head—"poison in the vital organs."

Rourke's eyebrows knitted together. "So? Then the gun must have been held close when it was fired."

"Yes, lieutenant. So close that the explosion burned a hole in his topcoat—a hole as big as a quarter. Lord, it takes courage to walk up to a man on a crowded street and shoot him."

Danny Rourke's lips curled viciously. "Courage, hell! Probably the guy we pin this on is all hopped up with cocaine. Or maybe marijuana. That junk gives guys bold ideas, too."

The ambulance had stopped and swung into position. The driver and a hospital surgeon leaped down with a stretcher. Danny Rourke took a moment to examine the charred hole in Jimmy Salem's coat; then the attendants shoved the lad into the ambulance. The ambulance sped away.

Rourke turned his attention to the dead man. The bum didn't fit into the picture; he didn't fit in at all.

"Too bad, fella," Rourke said under his breath. "Too damn bad—for both of us."

Another radio car came screaming up to the curb. A double kill on lower Broadway is enough to bring the big shots from headquarters. Inspector Wade climbed out of the prowl car and strode toward Rourke.

"What have you found out about this, Danny?"

"Open and shut, inspector. The kid was blasted to keep him from testifying against Frankie Morgan and Smooch Anders. The guy who plugged young Salem had to keep his gun under cover; maybe he was carrying a coat over his arm. The crowd kept moving, and he had to get right on top before he could let go. The slug went clean through the kid.

"That same slug caught this poor bum, here." He nodded toward the dead man. "He was right in front of Salem and the girl, walking toward them, when it happened."

Inspector Wade smiled thinly, without humor. "An open-and-shut case, eh, Danny?"

"Sure," Rourke said. "From here on, it's just a routine job of rounding up the rest of Frankie Morgan's mob and putting enough squeeze on them to make 'em crack."

"It'll be the toughest routine job *you* ever went up against," the inspector countered grimly. "Evidently, you don't know those rats.

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"No, Danny, you won't get anything off of that bunch with heat. You'll never get Frankie Morgan's moll to talk—not without witnesses."

The gasoline engine which operated the compressor on the sandblasting machine burst into a series of staccato explosions. Air hissed into the long hoses that snaked upward to the platform above the street. A fresh rain of sand started sifting down over the sidewalk. Not even a double kill on Broadway can halt a city's work.

Danny Rourke frowned. Something was nibbling at his mind; a vague, elusive something that he somehow couldn't piece into this grim puzzle. Then, suddenly, he knew what it was. His frown cleared.

"I've got a witness!" he shouted above the noise. "With a little luck, we'll break this case in a couple of hours."

Ten minutes later, Rourke was on his way uptown. He took Nora Hill along with him.

"We have to work fast," he told her. "I want you to have a look at some mugs that are mixed up with Frankie Morgan. I found out where they live, and something tells me that they'll be there. Smart crooks are easy to find when they know the cops are looking for them. They get themselves an alibi and sit tight. That's what I'm counting on, and if they are what I think they are, we'll bust that alibi wide open."

Nora sat straight and tense in the taxi. Her nerves were frayed near

the breaking point, and she held her hands tightly clenched on her lap.

"How soon will there be any word from the hospital about Jimmy?" she asked Rourke.

Rourke had been trying to keep her mind off Jimmy; he didn't want to tell her that he needed no word from the hospital to know that the kid had a poor chance of pulling through.

"The doctors ought to pass some word along in a couple of hours." He tried to change the subject. He said: "Keep your chin up, kid. We've got a job to do. This dame —Frankie's doll—is plenty smart. We've never been able to get anything on her. I wouldn't have brought you along if you could have looked at her picture in the Rogues Gallery; but she's never been mugged. She goes by the name of Ivy Field. It's a good name for her; she's ten acres of *poison* ivy."

The cab stopped in front of a shabby-looking building on Morningside Drive.

"Wait!" Rourke snapped at the driver. "We'll be going back downtown with some other passengers—I hope."

Rourke and Nora Hill climbed the dirty, worn stairs to the top floor. The detective punched the bell.

Ivy Field, herself, opened the door. She was large and voluptuous. A cigarette drooped from her too-red mouth, and her hard eyes were narrowed to the film of smoke that fogged up over her face.

"You smell like a copper to me," she said. There was sand in her voice. "What's the frame this time?"

Rourke pushed inside the apartment. Nora followed at his heels.

"Take a good look at her," he told the girl. "Ever see her before?"

Nora Hill shrank close to him, frightened. She stared uncertainly at Ivy Field.

"Y-yes," she answered slowly. "I think I have, but—but I can't be sure."

Frankie Morgan's moll folded her arms lazily and looked mockingly at Danny Rourke.

"So what, copper?" she challenged.

"I thought maybe Miss Hill had seen you downtown about noon today," Rourke said.

"Me? Not me, copper. I ain't been below 125th Street in more'n a week. Why?"

"Two men were gunned down there a few minutes after one o'clock. One of them was the kid who was going to testify against Frankie Morgan and Smooch Anders."

"That don't mean nothing." Ivy Field shrugged her shoulders indifferently. "Frankie and me have been washed up for months. He ain't nothing to me."

Rourke pushed on down the hall and into the front room of the dingy flat. A man sat at a round table, riffling a deck of cards. He was a ratty-looking guy with narrow, staring eyes and disheveled black hair.

Rourke sniffed the air. "Like I thought it would be," he growled. "Marijuana! Great stuff for building up a guy's nerve, they tell me." He studied the man for a minute, then: "I've seen you in the line-up, downtown, haven't I, fella?"

"Sure!" the little guy snarled. "Me—I'm Reefer Shaw. Twenty-two arrests and one conviction. Get it over with, copper. What's the rap?"

Ivy Field laughed shrilly. "This dumb flatfoot's got an idea he's gonna hang murder on us. Would *you* croak a guy to spring Frankie? Ain't that a laugh."

Evidently, Reefer Shaw didn't feel like laughing. The sound that came from his throat had little mirth in it.

"What Ivy means is that we don't want Frankie sprung. Ivy's thrown in with me—if you get what I mean."

Danny Rourke did. But he didn't believe it. He said: "By any chance, Reefer, were you on lower Broadway after one o'clock this afternoon."

"Cripes, no! I been playin' solitaire here all afternoon, ain't I, Ivy? I ain't been downtown in a long time, copper; six months, anyhow."

"Just about the time the Midtown Gold-Buying Service was stuck up, huh, Reefer?"

"You bulls have had one crack at pinnin' that job on me," Shaw rasped.

Rourke took his hands out of his pockets and began to prowl the apartment.

"If it's a gat you're looking for," Ivy Field grated, "go ahead and waste your time."

It wasn't a gun Danny Rourke was looking for. He knew they'd be too smart for that. He was looking for something else; something he probably wouldn't be able to see with the naked eye.

He went into the dark, cluttered bedroom and opened a clothes closet. When he reappeared, one corner of his mouth was twisted in a grim, sardonic smile. He carried two coats over his arm. One was the woman's, with a ruffled fur collar; the other belonged to Reefer Shaw.

"Come on," he growled. "We're taking a ride downtown!"

The sweat room at police headquarters was flooded with light, and Danny Rourke strode up and down as he waited. On the table near where he paced were the two coats —Ivy Field's and Reefer Shaw's.

Nora Hill sat rigid in a chair, watching Rourke and now and then glancing at the coats. She knew that in some way the two garments were extremely important; but, in what way, she hadn't the faintest guess.

She couldn't keep her mind off Jimmy Salem. She moistened her lips. "Would it be asking too much," she said to Rourke, "for you to call the hospital again?"

"It's only been twenty minutes since they told us that the kid's going to pull out of it all right," he said.

"I know. But when you love—"

She stopped. The door had opened and two officers brought Ivy Field and Reefer Shaw into the room. They tried hard not to look worried; but when they saw the coats, they must have known that something was on the fire.

Inspector Wade came into the room in back of them. He squinted into the bright lights and turned to Rourke. "Where's the witnesses you've been talking about, Danny?"

The homicide detective waved a big hand at the two coats on the table.

"There," he answered. "They've just come back from the police laboratory in Brooklyn. They've been talking plenty."

"What the hell?" Reefer snarled.

"We'll make it short," Rourke said. "The idea was to keep Jimmy Salem from testifying against Mor-

gan and Anders. Salem was going to the D. A. for protection. The killer couldn't wait; he had to stop Salem damned fast.

"A crowded street, a lot of noise—it looked like a natural for a guy all coked up with marijuana. A gasoline engine was sputtering on the sidewalk; that was the spot to give it to the kid. And by picking that spot, the killer wrote his own confession, because they were sandblasting the building there. The laboratory sucked plenty of sandstone abrasions out of these coats. The coats are my witness—"

Ivy Field's face was ghastly, and Reefer Shaw's mouth hung open in terror. The woman recovered first.

"You can't send nobody up on evidence like that," she sneered. "They're sandblasting them buildings in New York every day in the week. Why, Benny and me was up by a place in Harlem the other day, and—"

"Sure, sure!" Reefer chimed in. "You can't fry nobody on dope like that."

"Can't we?" Rourke snapped. "Listen! Young Jimmy Salem was shot in front of that building they're sandblasting. We scraped some of the sandstone face, took it to the laboratory and compared it with the grains of sand and cement we vacuumed from these two coats. The lab put them to test—a test as positive as if you'd left your fingerprints on that building. It showed the composition of the two samples to be in exact ratio—something like three grains of brown to two of red to one of black. You see—no two compositions of sandstone are in the same ratio. So I think my witness fingered you two for murder, even though it couldn't talk!"

It did! Danny Rourke knew it; Inspector Wade knew it—and so did Ivy Field and Reefer Shaw.

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Continued from page 6

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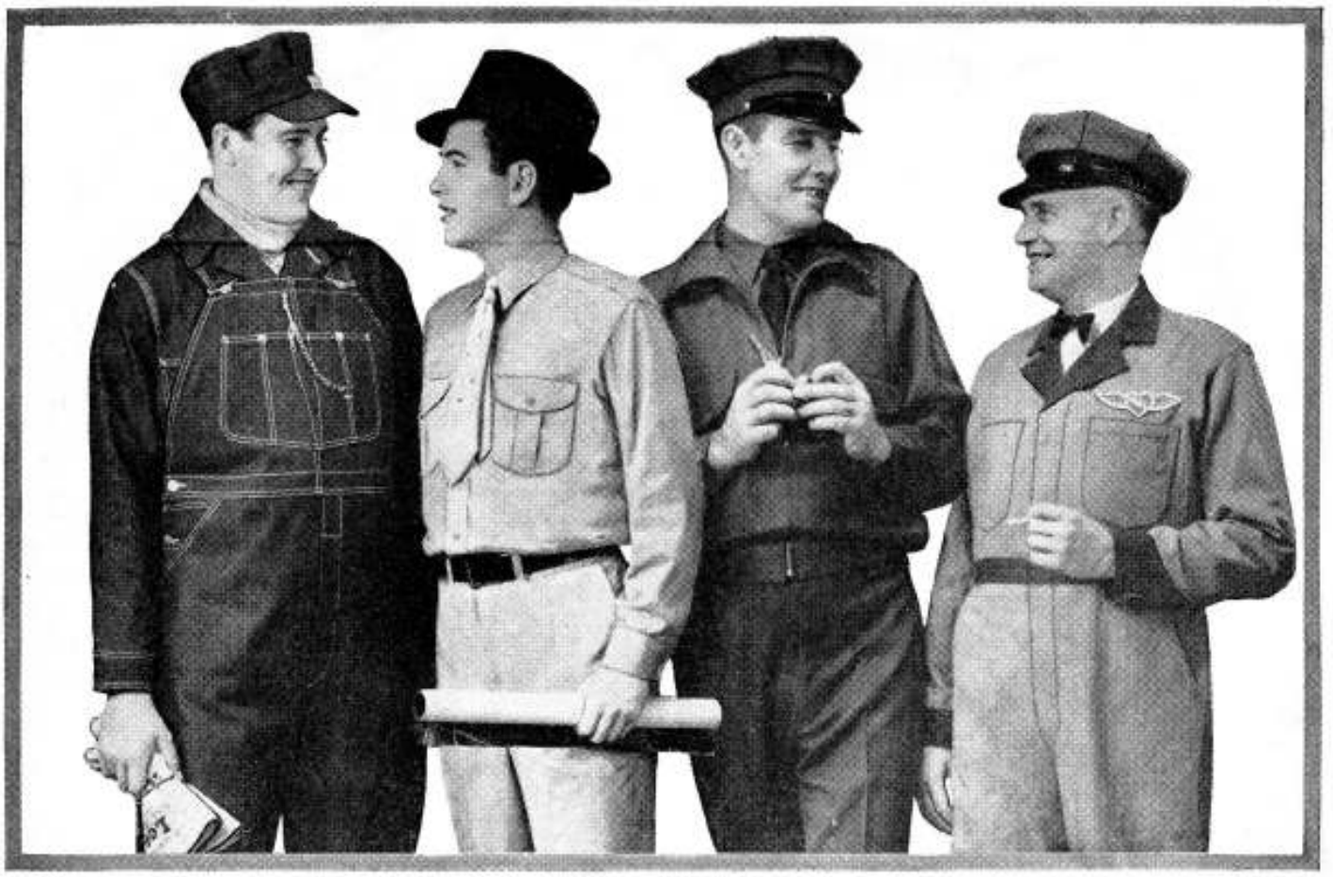

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